



LEADER OF THE OPPOSITION

[Title]

Background

The Northern Territory Opposition believes there is a need for greater focus on delivering consistent telecommunications to regional and remote areas particularly as economic and social growth is increasingly dependent on reliable services.

The 2016 Census showed the region of Litchfield, on the outskirts of Darwin has had the fastest population growth in the Territory over the past five years and the regional Top End town of Katherine was the fastest growing region outside of Darwin.

Meanwhile the Central Australian region is burgeoning with promise with industries such as tourism, mining and primary industries underpinned by government funding for regional service delivery and defence. A large percentage of Central Australia's population lives in outlying communities.

Growing regions require stable telecommunications. The NT Opposition understands there is no quick fix or easy solution however there has been a noticeable deterioration in these services in the last two years in some regional areas of the Northern Territory. Our submission is made through the lens of experiences and reports about telecommunications failures of recent years in the Top End.

Challenges

There are a number of challenges unique to the Northern Territory. Our population sits around 250,000 spread across 1.34 million square kilometres. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders account for almost 27 percent of the population.

Delivering infrastructure and services to remote and regional areas can be problematic but government investment in the vital roads network continues to open up the Northern Territory – a community ready for further expansion and development.

Under the \$680 million Mobile Black Spot Program 20 Northern Territory locations have been identified under Rounds 1 and 2 for new or upgraded base stations or small cells. No NT location was a priority location under the program. There have been 470 mobile blackspots identified across the Northern Territory.¹

Per the Regional Telecommunications Review 2018 Issues Paper, the review committee is acutely aware of the many issues facing remote Indigenous communities. Needless to say, the challenges are unique and therefore unique solutions should be explored to address them.

¹ Official website - <https://www.communications.gov.au/what-we-do/phone/mobile-services-and-coverage/mobile-black-spot-program>

The importance of better coverage

The benefits of better, more consistent telecommunications coverage in regional and remote areas cannot be underestimated.

Four prime examples include:

- Safety for travellers as well as residents – the importance of reliable telecommunications in the event of emergencies or natural disasters is paramount in remote and regional areas and can be the difference between life, serious injury or even death.
- Health service delivery implications – telemedicine is a growth industry in the Northern Territory where it's not always possible for patients to access the health care advice they need.
- Education service delivery implications – the online environment has become a necessary source for students of all ages, in all areas. As well, online learning is a universal tool across all age groups. In an era where multi skilling and broader knowledge are necessary for economic and social wellbeing, connectivity plays a vital role in delivering the necessary information to those who live in rural and remote areas.
- Economic development – as outlined in the discussion paper regional and remote areas make significant contributions to the national economy. In the Northern Territory, the key industries of mining and tourism and the growth of the agricultural and primary production areas are all increasingly reliant on consistent telecommunications. As well, the emerging development of remote community based businesses have a vital need for good connectivity.

Indigenous cultural based products such as those offered by Injalak Arts (Gunbalanya), Merrepen Arts (Daly River) and Tapatjatjaka Art and Craft (Titjikala) tap into e-commerce – a source of income which could grow with the right approach and access to reliable communications.

One of the key planks to addressing Indigenous disadvantage in the Northern Territory is the development of workable economies in remote and regional areas. A vital tool in developing these economies is dependable telecommunication.

Some grass roots examples

Retired couple Paula and Lionel Egan have been residents at Daly River, 220 km south-west of Darwin, for many years. Paula has kept an informal diary of all her dealings with Telstra and the unreliability of internet connections in the community. The problems she has reported include frequent mobile and internet outages and unsatisfactory customer service from Telstra.

In the regional community of Darwin River, just an hour from Darwin city and home to 700 people, there is an overload on the NBN tower. Those relying on the internet for their businesses report wide spread outages, delays and drop outs. One couple reported their

landline was down for three months while others have had issues with download speeds since joining the NBN. All have reported their issues.

On the Stuart Highway from Darwin to Katherine, the main thoroughfare between the two major towns – a whole section of the Highway has no mobile reception at all. This is a busy highway used by holidaymakers, locals, cargo transport, mining companies etc. Adequate mobile reception is badly lacking.

Engaging communities

The use of modern communication methods continues to grow in remote and regional communities. However, much still needs to be done to protect Aboriginal people from unscrupulous practices of some providers² and to educate communities about the proper use of these powerful tools.

In its 2008 paper *Telecommunications in Remote Indigenous Communities*, the Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA) outlined the challenges and complexity of delivering modern telecommunications to remote communities (and the uptake of that technology).

A decade later and the challenges remain however anecdotally the uptake is increasing, especially with young Aboriginal people.

Engaging remote communities and assisting them to safely embrace the technology has been the subject of countless studies, reviews and papers. One of the more compelling papers is *Rethinking the Indigenous Communication Program*³ developed by Broadband for the Bush Alliance in May 2013.

Suffice to say, when it comes to delivering safe, secure telecommunications in remote communities, thought should also go into the delivery of necessary programs to build understanding and resilience in communities over usage.

² <http://theconversation.com/aboriginal-communities-embrace-technology-but-they-have-unique-cyber-safety-challenges-69344>

³

file:///C:/Users/loref.PROD/Downloads/http___www.aphref.aph.gov.au_house_committee_jsdna_subs_sub0139attach%20c%20(1).pdf

Concluding remarks

Increased investment in telecommunications infrastructure in remote and regional areas is welcomed by the Northern Territory Opposition but only if the Northern Territory is appropriately advantaged by the investment.

Although the need may seem small compared to interstate regions, there is arguably a greater imperative to providing adequate telecommunications across the span of the Northern Territory. It is not just about better health and education outcomes, it is about building more sustainable and profitable communities.

Any upgrades to networks should help encourage and increase an independent economic base through the use of technology and modern communications most in urban settings take for granted. With stronger and diverse economies, communities have a better chance to thrive and deliver better outcomes for remote and rural residents.

Opposition.leader@nt.gov.au

Office of the Leader of the Opposition

4th Floor, Parliament House, Darwin

GPO Box 3700, Darwin, NT 0801, Australia