



**Indigenous Remote
Communications Association**

Broadband Solutions for Remote Areas

RESPONSE TO THE CALL FORM SUBMISSIONS FROM

IRCA

Indigenous Remote Communications Association Aboriginal and
Torres Strait Islander Aboriginal Corporation

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1. BACKGROUND

1.1 SUBMISSION BACKGROUND

The Minister for Broadband, Communications and the Digital Economy, Senator the Hon Stephen Conroy, called for submissions on policy and funding initiatives to provide enhanced broadband to rural and remote areas.

The Regional Telecommunications Independent Review Committee will consider submissions, led by Dr Bill Glasson AO, who will deliver a comprehensive report to the Minister in August on ways to improve telecommunications in rural and remote areas of Australia.

1.2 IRCA BACKGROUND

IRCA, as the peak body for Remote Indigenous Media Organisations, is pleased to respond to this inquiry.

IRCA was founded in 2001, and has been operating now for seven years. Its current membership is made up of Board members from six Remote Indigenous Organisations as follows:

PY Media	Queensland	Remote	Aboriginal
Ngaantyarjarra Media	Corporation		
PAW Media & Communications	CAAMA		
PAKAM			

The remote communities that these organisations, and in turn IRCA represents, make up part of the 2% of the nation not covered by the proposed National Broadband Network. We understand the National Broadband Network aims to deliver significantly improved Internet services to 98% of the country. IRCA is well positioned to provide vital responses to this 'call for submissions'.



Authorised, for and on behalf of IRCA Board of Management, 30/5/2008

2. INTRODUCTION

Access to the Internet in remote communities is varied across Australia. It is broadly agreed however, that Internet access in remote communities is in no way comparable to that available in major centres. By this we refer both to 'access to bandwidth', and 'access to computer hardware and software'. Geographic isolation, limited access to technical assistance, and poor computer literacy skills are all contributing factors to this state of affairs.

Our response to this call for submissions is divided into two broad sections: 'Current Services' and 'Considerations for Future Services'. We do not consider that our views are shared by all people in remote communities nor are they comprehensive, however they do focus on some of the main areas of concern for internet access for remote communities in Australia.

Our views have been developed through years of supporting broadcasting and communications services in remote communities.

3. CURRENT SERVICES

3.1 SATELLITE DELIVERED INTERNET SERVICES

Satellite delivered Internet services have been proffered as a viable solution to many remote centres since the initial TAPRIC rollout in 2002. The experiences of our membership of Satellite Delivered Internet Services are varied, particularly when compared with no service at all or dial up.

IRCA's position on Satellite Delivered Internet Services as a viable alternative to broadband (ADSL and faster services) in remote communities is as follows:

- Latency issues impact on the capacity of applications such as Skype, VOIP, and other live voice software;
- Cloud cover can have a substantial (negative) impact on the reliability of this service;

- Costs for satellite services are usually capped and not comparable to broadband services such as adsl;
- The need for an existing landline prohibits many potential users of this service;
- Trouble-shooting of satellite systems is difficult.

Despite claims by service providers of Satellite Delivered Internet Services of a reliable, trouble-free service, the experiences of users in remote communities would question this claim.

3.2 3G NETWORK CARDS

3G Network Cards are currently available in remote communities that have 3G mobile phone access. The network cards provide mobile access to the Internet and are relatively easy to use, particularly with laptop computers, although not so reliable with regular complaints of the service dropping out.

Experience indicates that the current plans and associated costs for the 3G Network Cards mean they are prohibitive. IRCA would strongly recommend that a subsidy be implemented for these devices (also including Next G cards when and if they become available) to bring costs in line with ADSL if this option is adopted.

4. CONSIDERATIONS FOR FUTURE SERVICES

4.1 WIRELESS TECHNOLOGIES

Given the small areas of land that remote communities occupy, ie. From one end of the community to the other, the delivery of broadband to remote Australia could well be seen as an opportunity to develop a unique model of wireless internet which could be accessible in all remote communities. By implementing a Common Wireless Network, 'users' could potentially take their laptops from community to community, in the full knowledge that the next community has internet access and the same network.

The advantages to remote Australia of an overall strategy that takes into account high transient lifestyles and a readiness to take up new technologies should be seriously considered and explored.

4.2 FIBRE-OPTIC ROLLOUT

Fibre-optic cable has already been rolled out to many remote communities. However these same communities do not have ADSL, although they may have 3G mobile telephone access. Our understanding is that the only impediment to ADSL provision in these communities is an upgrade of the local exchange.

We would ask government to carefully consider the long versus short-term costs and benefits of upgrading these exchanges to ADSL. By upgrading these exchanges, a major reduction in the proposed 2% of Australian households that will not have access the National Broadband Network may be achieved and provide a superior service to either Satellite or 3G options.

4.3 EXISTING STATE/TERRITORY PROJECTS

Many 'new' programs in remote communities pay little heed to the success or failure of what has happened previously. This is unfortunate, as much could be learned from the success or failure of past programs.

The Western Australian government are approaching the challenge of providing broadband to their many remote centres using models that could well be used or further developed for the 2% of Australian households that will not benefit from the National Broadband Network. For example the *Clever Networks Scheme* and the *Last Mile* are two current incentives which would be well worth following up in terms of 'lessons learned'.

4.4 TRAINING

Providing appropriate and adequate training in computer literacy will be essential to the take-up of the Internet in the remote sector. While several IT Training and Technical

Support Programs were funded through DCITA, the training programs did not extend beyond the life of that particular funding scheme, and participants were often trained on workstations that they had no access to once the training was completed.

A joint departmental approach to training might take some of the strain from a Communications department, which is not charged with looking after training needs. State, territory and federal education and training departments need to work together to develop an appropriate long term training strategy with measurable outcomes, for computer literacy in remote communities.

4.5 TECHNICAL SUPPORT

The matter of technical support in remote areas needs careful consideration. While past programs such as TAPRIC provided small capital items including satellite dishes and workstations to many remote centres, the absence of a long term strategy for technical support meant the ultimate failure of this program. One staff member of a RIMO spoke about being asked to look at a computer at an outstation that had not been working for several weeks. After locating the outstation, house and computer, she restarted the computer, which was then operational. Training in basic technical trouble-shooting may well mean a more reliable service.

There are opportunities using existing organisational networks such as the Remote Indigenous Media Organisations (RIMOS) to include IT Technical Support within their current service delivery to remote communities. These organisations, which have been poorly funded and inadequately supported by government for many years, would require substantial infrastructure development, but their capacity is enormous, as is their experience of providing technical support to remote communities. Within this context, there is also an opportunity to develop **Communications, as the 4th Essential Service** for remote communities (After Health, Police and Power/Water), and for job opportunities and a remote communications industry to emerge.

Alternatively, an overall strategy to provide affordable quality IT technical support and service through a subsidy scheme may also be a viable solution, although service suppliers in remote centres are generally highly sought after, and travel costs are prohibitive.

Either way, the issue of technical support will be an essential element to the viability of a broadband network in remote communities.

4.6 SELECTION CRITERIA

The criteria for selecting remote communities for various schemes has been problematic and inconsistent to date. For example, population may not always be the most appropriate criteria, nor the presence of existing services. We would ask government to carefully consider the process for deciding who receives services. Submission based processes may work well, and may enable communities who have shrinking populations to attract new government services and previous residents.

5. SUMMING UP

The challenge of providing remote communities with an affordable, accessible means to connect with the World Wide Web is both daunting and exciting. The potential impact on the quality of services and general lifestyle for people in remote communities is immense.

We welcome the Rudd's government approach to improved broadband services in the bush, and look forward to the outcome of this call for submissions.