

4 March 2008

**Mr Phillip Costa,
Chair – Standing Committee on Broadband in Rural
and Regional Communities
Parliament House
Sydney 2000**

INVITATION/SUBMISSION TO BROADBAND INQUIRY

Dear Mr. Costa,

Northern Rivers Councils congratulate the State Government on establishing the Standing Committee on Broadband in Rural and Regional Communities – and eagerly look forward to its work over the four years of the current Parliament.

Access to telecommunications in our community – of which Broadband is one, albeit significant, component – is becoming increasingly important as the years pass.

NOROC therefore wishes to bring to the attention of the Committee, the following broad concerns and issues:

Scope of Committee should at least match Federal scope – NOROC notes that Broadband is delivered as a consequence of Federal telecommunications initiatives. At present, the technological process for delivering fast internet services is ‘broadband’, but in the future that may not be the case, as new technologies are developed to replace and expand ‘broadband’. As such, there may be some merit in the Standing Committee expanding the scope of its inquiry to match the telecommunications responsibilities of the Federal Government.

NOROC notes the previous Federal Government created a \$2b. Communications Fund – to be invested in perpetuity – with the proceeds to be used to fund the roll-out of new technologies and address areas of market failure. A regular review of regional telecommunications is part of this process, and indeed, is currently underway.[See the Regional Telecommunications Review process at <http://www.rtirc.gov.au/home/submissions>].

Our community now faces a real challenge of establishing an audit process that is able to independently report to the Federal Government, from time to time, on the adequacy of telecommunications in our region. Put simply: our community ought be in a position to assess the standard of telecommunications and inform the Government, rather than accept at face-value the assurances of various private-enterprise telecommunications providers.

The importance of this is underlined by the fact that the Federal Government will be spending \$4.5b over the next four years to upgrade broadband internet services in regional Australia.

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During this time, regional communities also will be mindful that telephone coverage is improved, and that Telstra's Universal Service Obligation and Customer Service Guarantee are kept.

Monitoring these services is a big task, and one that could be usefully assisted by a broader scope of the Standing Committee on Broadband in Rural and Regional Communities.

Standing Committee's terms of reference – preliminary submission

NOROC brings to the committee's attention that there are many economic, social and environmental benefits for the improvement in telecommunications in the region – and the future shape of our economic prosperity in particular, mirrors the availability of modern telecommunications technology.

At one level, telecommunication is a modern form of 'transport' – it allows individuals to undertake employment and generate wealth in rural and regional areas where before this function may have been situated in larger metropolitan areas.

Efficient telecommunications can mean that transport patterns are altered replacing journey-to-work or other physical journeys by those who find they can access services and information on-line.

NOROC therefore considers that priority telecommunications needs for the Northern Rivers are as follows:

- Access to fast, free internet
- Universal, reliable mobile phone coverage
- Maintenance of Telstra's Universal Service Obligations and Customer Service Guarantees
- Greater utilisation of unused fibre optic – so called 'dark cable' (cable that already has been laid but not 'turned on'.)
- Investment in training for the community to use information technology
- A 'Future Watch' – programmes to ensure that the region does not fall behind in the availability of, and access to, technology.

The following are focus areas for the provision of telecommunications services in the future and provide scope for major improvement in the delivery of services:

- Local Government
- Economic Development
- Social Services
- Education
- Health Services
- E-Government

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The present infrastructure requirements for our region are highly speculative, and in a state of flux given Federal policy on the future of telecommunications. Accordingly, our region needs assistance with determining its true telecommunications needs as an urgent priority.

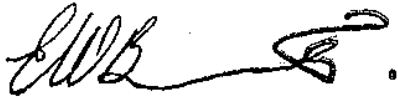
In order to further develop these issues for the benefit of the committee, NOROC wishes to cordially invite the committee to hold public submissions in the Northern Rivers during the course of its inquiry.

Committee representatives also are invited to meet with NOROC Mayors and Council General Managers at any of our three scheduled meeting dates during 2008 (preliminary dates are May 23, August 1, November 7).

Arrangements in the first instance can be made via the Executive Officer, Mr Russell Kelly, on 02 6687 8803 or noroc@lismore.nsw.gov.au.

Finally, I wish to once again commend the vision that has led to the creation of the present inquiry and wish the committee every success in its determinations.

Yours faithfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Ernie Bennett', followed by a horizontal line and a small flourish.

**Cr Ernie Bennett
President – NOROC
Northern Rivers Regional Organisation of Councils**