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Indigenous Telecommunications Section
Regional Communications Policy Branch
Department of Communications, Information Technology and the Arts
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RE: Request for submissions on “Backing Indigenous Ability - Delivering a Comprehensive Telecommunications Package in Indigenous Communities”

I apologise for the late submission, and hope that it might still be included for consideration.

Firstly I would like to commend the discussion paper for addressing as a distinctive issue the matter of providing remote area telecommunications to indigenous communities. This is clearly a critical element in ensuring that economic, social, health and education outcomes are achieved for these communities.

It should be stressed that there are a number of viable technological solutions that could be deployed today to provide the necessary bandwidth and accessibility. The difficulty is that the cost of these solutions may be prohibitive and require long term continual subsidization to be viable for commercial providers. Options to improve the situation may involve the development of new technology (or aggregations of existing technologies in new ways) to drive the cost of the services down to a more reasonable level. These matters should be explored in the use of the funding and may involve harnessing the considerable Australian research effort in this area. For example, my own Institute has undertaken considerable work in developing both wireless network access and satellite access that optimizes and minimizes the cost of delivering a range of telecommunications services, including voice and data, without compromising the quality of service. Some of this work is summarized in our 2004 Annual Report which is available at our web site www.itr.unisa.edu.au.

A key issue in the deployment of technology is that it meet the needs of the communities. Accordingly quality of service, expandability to accommodate growth in use and robustness to environmental conditions must be taken account of. In some past rural and remote deployments this has not been the case, resulting in inferior service provision and general dissatisfaction.

Notwithstanding the above, the principal issue facing the effective provision of telecommunications services (voice as well as broadband) to indigenous communities is not necessarily one of technology. There are significant gaps in our appreciation of how the telecommunications technologies can facilitate the outcomes identified above, and the cultural and adoption issues surrounding access, content and usage. Without adequately addressing these issues, we risk deploying at high cost an infrastructure that fails to service the needs for which it is designed.

A well scoped and resourced study in preparation for deployment is needed, and this must include technical, adoption and business issues. In particular it must show how sustainable relationships can be built between industry providers of telecommunications services and end-users with a view to meeting need. There will be a component of research and development necessary to achieve this.

I would like to draw your attention to a proposal to apply for supplementary funding under the CRC Programme by the Desert Knowledge CRC. Some of the objectives of the proposed program are:

- Developing and commercializing relevant technologies through proof of concept and demonstrator stage technology related research
- Exploring how desert community needs for information can be met, and dimensioning the vehicles for delivery of services in a cost effective manner
- Creating environments for adoption and use to expand social and business opportunities in remote and indigenous communities
- Establishing commercialization pathways for deploying appropriate technologies and business models.

Either myself or Dr Craig James (craig.james@csiro.au) from the CRC for Desert Knowledge can provide further information if required.

It would appear that these would well support the objectives of the discussion paper and make significant impact on ensuring that an effective solution for telecommunications packages to indigenous communities is found.

I hope these brief comments are of value in your consultation process.

Yours sincerely

Professor Andrew Parfitt
Director