



Australian Government

Department of Transport and Regional Services

Indigenous Telecommunications Section
Regional Communications Policy Branch
Department of Communications,
Information Technology and the Arts
GPO Box 2154
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Subject: *BACKING INDIGENOUS ABILITY* – SUBMISSION BY THE
DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORT AND REGIONAL SERVICES.

The Department of Transport and Regional Services is pleased to provide this submission for the *Backing Indigenous Ability - Delivering a Comprehensive Telecommunications Package in Indigenous Communities*'.

The submission focuses on telecommunications issues as they relate to Indigenous communities and the related opportunities that arise from the provision of telecommunication services. The Department's comments look at the needs of Indigenous communities in telecommunications service delivery rather than underlying technology considerations.

If you would like to discuss this submission further please contact Mr Gary Clark in the Regional and Indigenous Policy Branch by telephone 02 6274 7826 or email: gary.clark@dotars.gov.au.

Thank you for the opportunity for the Department to provide input into the *Backing Indigenous Ability* telecommunications program.

Yours sincerely

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Introduction and the Department's approach

The Department of Transport and Regional Services (DOTARS) Portfolio Budget Statement identifies one of the Department's key outcomes as:

- *'Contribute to the well-being of all Australians..... by assisting regions to manage their own futures.'*

The Department believes that telecommunications plays a key role in achieving this outcome, including for Indigenous communities in rural and remote areas of Australia. Telecommunications services allow people to participate in Australia's economic, social and cultural activities.

This submission focuses primarily on telecommunications issues relating to regional service delivery. The comments provided are from a remote Indigenous perspective rather than any underlying technological considerations.

DOTARS is the lead Australian Government agency for the East Kimberley Indigenous trial site. The Indigenous Trials were established by COAG in late 2002 to trial a new approach to improving coordination and delivery of government programs and services for Indigenous communities.

East Kimberley COAG Indigenous trial site

The COAG Indigenous Trials were established by COAG in late 2002 to trial a new approach to improving coordination and delivery of government programs and services for Indigenous communities. Governments agreed to work in partnership with a number of discrete Indigenous communities to support them to develop and implement long-lasting solutions to local problems.

Nationally, there are eight COAG Indigenous trial sites, with each site being supported by a major Australian Government Department as a lead agency.

DOTARS is the lead Australian Government agency for the East Kimberley COAG Indigenous trial in Western Australia. It commenced in July 2003, and is one of the more remote trial sites, with four remote communities of Balgo, Billiluna, Mulan and Ringer Soak. These are very small communities with populations of 350-500 in Balgo, 200 in Billiluna, 160 in Mulan and 130 in Ringer Soak.

The nearest service town is Halls Creek with a population of 1300. The communities are located anywhere between 200 to 400 kms in a southerly direction from Halls Creek.

The other trial partners in the trail are the Western Australian Department of Indigenous Affairs and the Shire of Halls Creek.

The current overarching priorities for the East Kimberley trial site are stabilising communities in the areas of law and order, essential services and community capacity

and governance. The focus areas for future work are improved service delivery and employment and training opportunities.

There is little doubt that telecommunications is a vitally important component for these communities to achieve successful outcomes against these priorities.

The quality of access to telecommunications varies throughout this trial site. Most of these communities have an IT resource centre where community members can access internet and email services. The quality of the service is very dependent on the skills and knowledge of the IT resource centre manager. Slow download speeds, costs of internet access, infected computers and lack of firewalls also exacerbate the problem.

Telecommunications and Indigenous Communities

Telecommunications is a powerful and important tool in the development of economic opportunities and social resilience in indigenous communities located in rural and remote areas.

The delivery of services to rural and remote areas of Australia is a key challenge for regional development. In general, the further one travels from urban centres the lower the level and availability of services.

The stark reality is that in many remote Indigenous communities telecommunications access is very limited. We understand many people are keen to discover the online world, however their own community access points are quite often heavily policed and in many cases availability is severely limited. The community access points lack basic fire walls and are constantly attacked by computer viruses, suffer from poor IT support and suffer slow download speeds.

Telecommunications assists in reducing the 'tyranny of distance' and helps minimise the impact of geographic and social isolation. Improved telecommunications technology and infrastructure has made available new ways of delivering services.

Telecommunications can overcome issues relating to isolation, increased costs and time of travel, and limited access to key government service providers.

Telecommunications is vital to assist indigenous communities gain access to education, health, legal, banking and government services.

With broadband technology having a greater coverage in rural Australia, faster internet access is now possible in more rural and remote communities.

In those selected remote areas where the application of high quality video conferencing is available, the ability of professionals such as teachers, doctors, nurses, lawyers to work collaboratively with their peers can bring outstanding results for their local residents without having to leave their community.

The installation and ongoing costs of satellite technology for internet access with reasonable downloads can be prohibitively expensive.

It would be ideal to have Indigenous people allowed free access to online information, to allow them to use and create what is important and relevant to them. At the moment e-commerce can not be accessed by most community members because the supporting monetary structures of credit card ownership and the necessary financial management skills are not in place.

Competition amongst Carriers

DOTARS notes that many of the Government initiatives over recent years have attempted to introduce greater competition between telecommunications suppliers into rural and remote areas. It appears that the markets are too small in many of these locations, let alone Indigenous communities, to support genuine, strong, sustainable competition.

As an example, one of the barriers to internet access for Indigenous communities is the high cost of the connectivity of the 2 way satellite technology. In remote Australia, purchase plans seldom exist for the service and the 2-way satellite is usually limited to downloads of 500mb per month. Any downloads above that and the organisation pays an exorbitant rate. A similar broadband service with 500mb of download in a metropolitan area would cost approximately \$50 per month.

This does not rule out that over time and with possible changes in market demographics and technology costs, it may be possible that greater competition could emerge in rural, remote and Indigenous communities. However, there is little indication that it is likely to change in the short to medium term.

DOTARS suggests that consideration may be given to developing mechanisms to ensure that telecommunications service delivery in remote Indigenous communities (particularly at a community level but also for individuals) should meet a minimum services standard, even in very thin markets.

Backing Indigenous Ability

Around 25% of Australia's Indigenous people live in remote areas that have an identified significant disadvantage for accessing telecommunications.

The key elements of *Backing Indigenous Ability* - services, engagement, content development, training and support, and sustainability – provide a comprehensive strategy to move towards supplying telecommunications services to remote communities.

The challenge will be to deliver telecommunications services that meet the needs of remote Indigenous communities.

Close linkages with the roll-out of other *Connect Australia* programs (Broadband Connect, Clever Networks and Mobile Connect) will be advantageous to Indigenous communities, and avoid concerns about program gaps or duplication.

The utilisation of other appropriate Australian Government programs and facilities should be encouraged to ensure maximum benefit for Indigenous communities. This

may involve Australian Government departments and agencies making available their regional office telecommunications facilities, such as a video conferencing facility.

DOTARS suggests that the Department of Communications, Information Technology and the Arts might consider utilising the COAG trail sites as a pre-eminent location for a whole-of-government approach to providing telecommunications services.

DOTARS suggests that an audit of current telecommunications provision and needs in remote Indigenous communities should be undertaken in order to allow for a strategic use of program funding.