

Submission to the USO enquiry

Gulf Savannah Development (GSD) appreciates the opportunity to make a submission to the ACCC USO enquiry.

Gulf Savannah Development is the facilitating organisation for the Gulf Savannah Region to drive economic development projects and initiatives for the benefit of its stakeholders. It is a central representative body to engage with external entities to drive the growth of the Gulf Savannah Region. GSD brings together people, ideas and resources to drive economic development and growth in the Gulf Savannah Region. Its current focus is on developing a strategic plan for the region, supporting and growing tourism and providing specific services to Gulf Savannah residents and businesses.

GSD believes in investments that expand and improve communications in remote and regional Australia, not in changes that have the potential to reduce services to those who most need them. It is imperative the Universal Service Obligation (USO) remains enshrined in policy particularly for those who reside in regional and rural Australia.

I refer to the following points from the “overview” of the Productivity Commission’s report into the Universal Service Obligation (USO):

“The existence of the NBN means that the objective of universal service can be reframed to provide a baseline (or minimum) broadband service to all premises in Australia, having regard to its accessibility and affordability, once NBN infrastructure is fully rolled out. This encapsulates access to both the internet and voice services as the internet will increasingly be the medium for voice communication.

- While NBN infrastructure will deliver a high quality voice service over fixed-line and fixed wireless networks, there is a question about the adequacy of NBN services as a baseline service in pockets of the satellite footprint, particularly given the high dependency on the network in areas where there is no mobile coverage (affecting up to 90 000 premises).*
- To the extent that there are any remaining availability, accessibility or affordability gaps once the NBN rollout is complete, current trends and existing policy settings suggest that these are likely to be small and concentrated, and amenable to specific social programs rather than large scale government interventions such as the TUSO.”*

Living in an area that has had the NBN rolled out recently, local government areas covered by the GSD footprint are still encountering poor quality internet speeds and need to be assured that the “baseline” referred to above is at least as good as it is under the current USO and will be have the same reliability. A regional service provider must be in a position to offer a tested, reliable and affordable solution. At this point in time, there are still concerns whether the NBN roll out will meet regional Australia’s current and future needs in relation to access, service standards and cost.



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Maintenance of the existing copper network is essential as a minimum standard in all communities until high quality fibre and mobile networks are widely, consistently and continually available.

To grow business activity and ensure access to online services (including education and health) in our Shire, an affordable, reliable, high speed network must be a prerequisite. It is safe to say that the capacity of Sky Muster to meet all these conditions remains inadequately tested and it cannot be proffered as a comparable alternative to existing the landline service. Many existing consumers have yet to be connected, the potential future demand for the service is simply unknown and any satellite customer will testify to their concerns based on previous experience with congestion due to oversubscription.

The 'specific social programs' referred in the report need to ensure that regional and rural Australia receive the same quality of service as does urban Australia notwithstanding that they are small and concentrated. These areas still have to do business with the rest of the world and require the same levels of access and reliability. The local government areas represented by GSD are vulnerable to seasonal extreme weather events – flooding, cyclones, bushfires, drought and communication technology is crucial to community resilience in this rural remote context. Improved communication has an exponential positive impact on health, education and economic outcomes as well as boosting social inclusivity. Internet and mobile services underpin effective disaster management, business development and tourism – the latter presenting a pivotal opportunity for economic development in a location rich with natural attractions, early settler history, Indigenous cultural heritage, World Heritage listed fossil fields that are amongst the most extensive in the world. A strong agricultural industry keen to diversify and enhance efficiencies as well as developing interests in mineral resources and alternative energy would also benefit from the technological opportunities afforded by ongoing investment in telecommunications - underpinning the long term sustainability of our region.

The Northern Australia White Paper specifically identified the need for investment in critical economic and social infrastructure to support development in the region. GSD is working extensively in delivering the Australian Small Business Advisory Service to 80 small business operators across the Gulf Savannah Region. Many of these operators are tourism ventures which are at a huge disadvantage due to the poor quality of telecommunications that are present in the region. Many businesses in our region are unable to access the internet except at 2 and 4.00am in the morning in order to pay bills and do simple tasks that the rest of Australia takes for granted. A minimum standard such as is provided by the USO should not be put in jeopardy because of a view that remote Australia is not worth the effort.

For these reasons it is important that a quality proven alternative is in place before the abandonment of the USO.

Mobile services in the North are virtually non- existent. This area needs adequate telecommunication services in order to respond to emergencies, provide services such as School of the Air to our children and provide health and welfare services as well as business communications. There has to be a minimum standard maintained such as the USO to ensure that we are no worse off than we are now.



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GSD believes that the voice of rural remote Australia must be given weight in this consultation process; and fervently hope the Enquiry will determine that the USO remain a priority of service especially in Rural and Remote Australia.

Gillian Teague
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Our Vision: "The Gulf Savannah will be recognised nationally as a dynamic region where people want to invest, work, live and play"



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