



the **development board**

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Regional Broadband Policy and Technical Support  
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GPO Box 2154  
Canberra ACT 2601  
AUSTRALIA

To Whom it May Concern,

**RE: SUBMISSION ON BROADBAND CONNECT AND CLEVER NETWORKS**

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This submission on the Broadband Connect and Clever Networks programs from the Northern Rivers Regional Development Board (NRRDB) provides comment on the importance of information and telecommunications infrastructure in regional NSW and support for investment into enhancing regional capacity and sustainability of such services.

The NRRDB is a facilitator of sustainable economic development and catalyst for new investment and industry development in the region through creative partnerships with key stakeholders in the far-north coast region (i.e. Northern Rivers) of NSW.

The Development Board recognises that:

- businesses, particularly, 'knowledge-based' business, will only grow or be attracted to the Northern Rivers if they have access to up-to-date information and communications technologies (ICT) infrastructure and skilled people;
- major concerns for regional businesses<sup>1</sup> include mobile phone reception/ quality, telecommunications services, and telecommunications costs; and
- Northern Rivers businesses often rely on ICT suppliers who are outside their communities and incur higher ICT costs than equivalent businesses located in urban centres.

*A recent study identified that " To varying degrees for different members of the communities studied, online services are steadily assuming greater importance. Access to good communications infrastructure is critical for economic development plans in which e-commerce, home-based business, or telecommuting are central. Good access to reliable communications and new technologies is a selling point to attract people to rural communities ..."<sup>2</sup>*

The Development Board recognises that ICT infrastructure is a key driver of regional economic growth because it enables both the development and intensification of a networked economy. The following principles reflects the Board's position that Northern Rivers businesses and industry must have access to a full range of affordable ICT services if they are to remain competitive and prosper in today's expanded economic environment. The Development Board:

- advocates for better and more affordable ICT access within the Northern Rivers;

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<sup>1</sup> Based on the business survey reported in ACCI Review, (October 2001), *What Regional Business Needs: Results of Survey of Regionally-based Firms*, Australian Chamber of Commerce & Industry, Barton, ACT

<sup>2</sup> Goggin, G. (2003), *Rural Communities Online: Networking to link Consumers to Providers*, Centre for Critical and Cultural Studies, University of Queensland, Melbourne, p 1. (Report prepared for Telstra's Consumer Consultative Council on the findings of three representative but diverse small regional areas, one of which was Mullumbimby)

- encourages the establishment of strong relationships with ICT service providers to better understand ICT service availability & infrastructure issues within the Northern Rivers;
- supports training initiatives to help build the ICT skill base within the Northern Rivers; and
- recognises the importance of businesses in the region who are ICT champions and are willing to showcase the benefits of using ICT.

A collaborative program between the Northern Rivers Regional Development Board, NSW Department of State and Regional Development, Northern Rivers Area Consultative Committee, General Managers (of local councils) Group, Southern Cross University, NSW Department of Planning has resulted in a comprehensive framework for industry development and infrastructure investment – the Northern Rivers Regional Industry and Economic Plan (RIEP)<sup>3</sup> (attached). The RIEP recognises a need to increase efficiency and ensure that business and industry is afforded access to well maintained and world class hard and soft infrastructure through continued investment in economic enabling infrastructure such as roads, water and sewerage, energy, transport, **ICTs**, and education, health, community services, environment and leisure facilities and services. One of the primary objectives in the RIEP is to increase access to ICTs that are equivalent to those delivered in metropolitan areas.

The RIEP recognises the necessary contribution of a range of government services to regional development, which is similar to the targeted services for Clever Networks. An additional target service area could include transport, as service delivery through ICTs can often provide an alternative means to providing access to goods and services, which is the primary function of transport services and infrastructure. Such an approach recognises an integrated focus on service delivery at the most appropriate point of contact.

The RIEP also identifies the following priorities for ICTs infrastructure development<sup>4</sup>:

- Support the partner Councils in the Northern Rivers and SE Queensland in the Broadening Broadband Aggregation Project by assisting lobbying efforts and preparing a detailed audit of broadband demand and mobile phone ‘hot spots’ throughout the entire region. A primary aim of this initiative is to ensure equity of access to broadband and mobile phone services across the region, particularly in the hinterland areas.
- Investigate models for Councils and explore other options with service providers in the Northern Rivers region (in conjunction with other stakeholders) to prepare a business case for broadband telecommunications infrastructure rollout to communities throughout the region.
- Embrace and promote ‘on line’ trading and digital trade capacity across the region.
- Continue efforts to improve mobile phone coverage and expanding access to high speed internet connections.

In respect to the other resources or programs brokers for the Clever Networks program should be aware of, this regional framework that identifies industry and economic development priorities for the Northern Rivers of NSW is a useful resource to be considered with regional demand aggregation studies. The NRRDB encourages government assistance in exploring other options with service providers to prepare a business case for broadband and telecommunications infrastructure.

In conclusion, the Development Board is supportive in broad terms of the policy objectives of the Broadband Connect and Clever Networks programs and the emphasis on equitable access. Further emphasis on affordability in these policy objectives and a recognition of the importance of strong relationships with ICT service providers to better understand ICT service availability &

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<sup>3</sup> NRRDB, DSRD, DOP, SCU. 2005. *Northern Rivers Regional Industry and Economic Plan: a community road map to developing our future*. Final Report incorporating stakeholder feedback. NRRDB, Northern Rivers.

<sup>4</sup> RIEP p21

infrastructure issues within regional NSW is encouraged in further development of the policy framework for these programs.

The Development Board encourages consideration of these comments in finalisation of the Connect Australia package. For further information on any of the matters raised in this submission, please contact Katrina Luckie on 02 6622 4011.

Regards

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'K. Luckie', written in a cursive style.

Katrina Luckie  
**Executive Director**

Encl:

- Regional Industry and Economic Plan: Final Report, November 2005.
- Working Paper for a Regional Industry and Economic Plan, November 2003.