

Submission to
The Agricultural Competitiveness Green Paper

To:

The Agricultural Competitiveness Taskforce

CANBERRA ACT 2600

Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet

PO Box 6500

Submission made on behalf of:

Yaraka Isisford Branch of the Isolated Children's Parents' Association.

ICPA (Aust) is a voluntary, non-profit, apolitical parent body dedicated to ensuring that all rural and remote students have equity of access to a continuing and appropriate education. ICPA members Work together for equity of access to education for all students who live in rural and remote Australia

This submission contains no material supplied in confidence and can be placed on the Agricultural Competitiveness White Paper website

Given that our organisation (ICPA) is a voluntary, non-profit, apolitical parent body dedicated to ensuring that all rural and remote students have equity of access to a continuing and appropriate education the focus of this submission will be on the provision of such an education for those students who are geographically isolated.

Therefore in accordance with the considerations and scope as outlined on the website:

<http://agriculturalcompetitiveness.dpmc.gov.au/how-make-submission-fact-sheet>

This submission will primarily focus on and respond to the areas of “Infrastructure - Communications” (in relation to education of rural and remote students) and “Education, skills and training, and labour” (in relation to education of rural and remote students)

Infrastructure - Communications:

Stakeholders raised the need for effective and affordable telecommunications systems, including consistent and reliable access to satellites, mobile phone network coverage and broadband internet. Stakeholders emphasised the importance of internet (speed and availability) and mobile phone coverage for day-to-day farm management and to enable them to access online information, training and education. Modern communications technology can allow farmers to implement the latest technologies, raise productivity and be in contact with their markets.

This is essential – those who reside in areas with no mobile phone coverage and rely on satellite as the only means of internet delivery are being further marginalised at an alarming rate. No mobile

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signal prevents the use of not only mobile phones but also tablet devices and apps which require the use of mobile signal to function to 100% of their capacity.

Mobile Black Spot Programme: *The Government is providing \$100 million to improve mobile coverage and increase competition by rolling out new mobile base stations. The funding will be allocated through a competitive selection process designed to leverage significant co-contributions from industry, local and State governments, and communities.*

Our branch has made a submission to the Mobile Black Spot Programme and await a favourable response from Government. The location noted in the submission (Mt Slowcombe Yaraka Queensland) is ideal and the provision of mobile service will greatly assist all residents of the district, as well as those passing through the area.

Given that *“The Government is committed to improving access to communications technology for all Australians, including those in regional areas, who often face the greatest difficulties with service”* we remain optimistic that the outcome of deliberations surrounding our submission will result in the provision of a mobile telephone service in the Yaraka (Queensland) area.

Rural and remote families who reside in geographically isolated areas which are unlikely to ever have mobile phone coverage, could be further assisted by the provision of access to Micro Mobile phone cells which access the service provider via the Internet to enable the use of Smart and other Mobile phones.

Policy idea 3—Enhancing communications

The Government is committed to ensuring that farmers and regional communities have access to reliable and affordable communications systems. Views are sought on areas of focus for future government and commercial investment in communications infrastructure, as well as options to assist farmers and regional communities to best use the communications infrastructure currently being deployed.

The Government is interested in information on how government programmes and services can be best designed to ensure farmers and regional communities have access to the reliable and affordable communications systems—be they satellites, mobile phone networks, or broadband internet—on which their businesses rely.

The Internet has become an integral part of modern life. Current government policy, while claiming to advance access to the Internet in the Bush, has a very real outcome of not providing an affordable service that will meet the real evolving demands of Users (including those who are utilising this service for the provision of distance and further education) and Businesses in remote areas of Australia.

Distance and Further Education must be seen in the light of its importance to the whole of Australia. The Long Term Satellite Solution (LTSS) **must** be able to meet the evolving needs of this sector.

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Consideration must be given to the needs of Students. The LTSS should provide a classification (Education) that provides CoS (Class of Service) for Audio and Video streams. Usage should not be debited against the Primary Internet Account and thus avoid issues with Fair Use Limits. Users within the proposed Education Classification must be able to access Non Metered streams without the Usage being counted.

This could be achieved by NBN having the ability to configure an Education port on the service modem. Another option is to treat a Home School room as a location to receive a subsidised NBN installation and configure it as an education service.

It is essential that all avenues are explored to ensure that Families and Businesses (which are often the same thing in the Bush) have access to modern, reliable and cost effective communications.

Satellite broadband services: *Around \$2 billion is being spent on designing, building and launching the NBN long-term satellite services (LTSS) and for other LTSS equipment and services. The LTSS is designed to bring a step change in the experience of broadband users in regional and remote Australia, with peak download speeds of 25 megabits per second (Mbps) and upload speeds of 5Mbps. **These speeds exceed those typically available to ADSL2+ users in metropolitan Australia today.** As a temporary measure until the LTSS becomes operational in early 2016, NBN Co has deployed the interim satellite service and recently launched a subsidy scheme to help up to 9,000 homes, farms and small businesses in regional and remote areas purchase a reasonably priced commercial satellite service*

“The LTSS is designed to bring a step change in the experience of broadband users in regional and remote Australia, with **peak** download speeds of 25 megabits per second (Mbps) and upload speeds of 5Mbps. These speeds exceed those typically available to ADSL2+ users in metropolitan Australia today.”

At face value, this information looks encouraging and infers that LTSS subscribers will indeed have parity with their city cousins. However in reality this is very misleading and disappointing: it **must** be remembered that the operative word is “PEAK” and these peak download speeds will not necessarily reflect the actual experience of a User.

For example, if the peak speed on a particular highway is set at 110 km/hour this could be achieved at 2.00 a.m. when there are very few or no other cars on the highway. However during peak hour traffic, the actual user experience maybe restricted to as little as 50 km/hour, owing the volume of traffic attempting to use the road at that time.

Despite repeated requests made on behalf of Yaraka/Isisford Branch of ICPA by ICPA Australia Inc. neither NBN Co. nor the Government have been willing to publish projected “Busy Hour” performance figures for the LTSS. Instead all that appears to be available is repeated rhetoric regarding Peak Performance Speeds.

Further to this, it is not possible to make a direct comparison between an ADSL service and a Satellite service as the delay inherent on a Satellite provided service reduces its effective performance.

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Recent reports have indicated that the launch of the LTSS satellites is twelve months behind schedule and are unlikely to happen as planned. Meantime, those in rural and remote areas who have no other choice of internet service provision wait and wait and wait.....

By the very nature of their geographically isolated locations, Rural and Remote Internet Users rely heavily on the Internet for Business, Domestic / Social interaction and **most importantly Education.**

There has been much discussion surrounding Fair Use Policies for those consumers whose internet service is being provided by the NBN Interim Satellite Solution, the NBN Long Term Satellite Solution and the NextG Wireless Service.

A 2014 study published in The Courier Mail (16/2/15) regarding information sourced from Foad Fadaghi from Research Group Telsyle showed that the average domestic usage of the Internet in Australia is 175GB/month.

The Fair Use Policy has been set as follows:

The ISS has been set at less than 10GB/month

NBN Wireless at 200GB/month

Cable and Optic Fibre are **unlimited.**

LTSS – not yet published

Thus the members of our organisation are further marginalised and discriminated against, especially those who rely on this service for the provision of education for their children. At 10 GB/month, ISS families with multi aged school rooms will struggle to stay within the Fair Use policy, particularly when business and domestic usage (both of which are virtually unavoidable in the twenty-first century) are considered.

These families will be locked out many of the advances the Federal Government has been promoting.

It is essential the any Fair Use policy implemented for the LTSS reflect the real demand for Internet in the Bush, and not be used to paper over a flawed implementation of the NBN in the Bush.

The National Broadband Network (NBN) will assist Australia's agricultural competitiveness through creating numerous opportunities, including: real-time access to market information; improving interaction with family and friends through video links, reducing the barriers of distance; and facilitating training to agricultural producers through online tertiary and vocational education courses, meaning that family members can study from home, reducing the population flow from rural to urban areas.

Once again, the rhetoric sounds impressive! However once the information is properly unpacked, it quickly loses momentum. It is essential that the LTSS DOES provide sufficient capacity for all those who will need to rely on it for the provision of appropriate internet services.

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An analogy such as presented by Stephanie Tolan, “Is it a Cheetah?” could be used to highlight the potential danger of underestimating the usage requirements of rural and remote Australia, especially if such requirements are being restricted by 1) lack of capability of the system to perform as required to perform certain tasks (i.e. download a movie at an AFFORDABLE COST and in a REALISTIC TIME FRAME) and 2) a fair use policy which is by its very nature not fair at all!!

It would be very easy to substitute “How much internet will they use?” for the cheetah mentioned in this article!

http://www.stephanietolan.com/is_it_a_cheetah.htm

To retain existing Bush residents / staff and to attract new residents / staff it is essential that these people have access to the communication facilities that are available in larger centres.

If, in particular, people believe that their childrens’ education is being compromised by lack of access to an AFFORDABLE and RELIABLE internet service, they will either relocate away from rural and remote areas or chose not to make such areas their preferred location in the first place.

The flow on effect of decisions such as this can only mean a further down-turn in the rural economy and rural and regional towns and communities.

Education, skills and training, and labour:

Stakeholders also noted the higher cost burden of education for families in regional areas¹. Schooling can be limited or unavailable in small regional communities that can mean children need to travel to cities or regional centres, particularly for higher education. This means farming families are often subject to costs for boarding school or assisting older children with accommodation and living costs.

It should be noted that there are seven shires in Outback Queensland which do not have a high school. Most members of the Yaraka/Isisford branch of ICPA reside in the Longreach Regional Council jurisdiction. There is a high school located in Longreach however Longreach is 220 km from Yaraka and 100 km from Isisford so all children belonging to our branch members MUST relocated to attend high school or study their secondary education via distance education. This mode of delivery is simply not suitable for many high school subjects and notwithstanding that, these students need to access the cultural and sporting opportunities which are unavailable while studying via distance education. There is also the issue of access to a peer group and face-to-face interaction etc.

a. Increasing financial support for regional education—The Government currently provides the Assistance for Isolated Children (AIC) allowance to support families in regional or remote communities with children in education. This includes support for families with students who must board away from home (up to \$9,133 per year), are enrolled in distance education course (\$3,833 per year), or require a second home to be maintained to allow children to attend school daily (\$223.31 per fortnight, per student up to three students per family).

¹ See for example Longerenong Agricultural College submission IP249, Blair and Josie Angus submission IP253 and Yaraka Isisford Branch, Isolated Children’s Parents’ Association submission IP343.

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Stakeholders reported that these payments, although helpful, have not increased at the same rate as school costs so that the effect of the grant was diminished². Views are sought on whether assistance of the AIC for individual families should be expanded. For example, this could be done by increasing assistance payments, broadening the definition of geographically isolated or lowering the parental asset test threshold required for the Additional Boarding Allowance.

Comment in relation to:

- Increasing assistance payments, - this is crucial. The CPI Education Sub-index has for many years recorded increases in education expenses at approximately 5% above the CPI. As increases with assistance such as AIC have historically been based on the CPI the real gap between assistance and costs grows annually at 5%. This allowance needs a considerable increase to ameliorate this disparity. Once this has occurred, all future increases should be based on the CPI Education Sub-index as this is a genuine reflection of education costs.
 - Broadening the definition of geographically isolated – no need to broaden this definition
 - Lowering the parental asset test threshold required for the Additional Boarding Allowance – Particularly during times of drought and other natural disasters the parental asset test threshold is pointless and should be removed. Unless the asset is able to be liquidated, you can't eat it and nor can you pay education (or other) costs with it. A herd of cattle in a drought may be an asset on paper but maybe totally unsalable and in fact a liability as they consume vast quantities of purchased fodder in an effort to sustain them and MAYBE they will survive the drought and be saleable one day. Perhaps these assets may be in the form of stocks and shares – do our city counterparts have to liquidate their superannuation to educate their children?
- b.** Stakeholders also suggested a living away from home allowance for students from remote areas undertaking tertiary agriculture study. The Government, through Youth Allowance, provides financial help for young people who are studying full-time, undertaking a full-time Australian Apprenticeship, training, looking for work or sick. Students who live away from home in order to study or train may be eligible for higher rates of Youth Allowance. Views are sought on whether Youth Allowance assistance or eligibility criteria should be expanded.

There is an urgent need for a dedicated Tertiary Access Allowance which is able to be accessed by rural and remote families.

² See for example AJ and PA McBride Pty Ltd submission IP268 and Isolated Children's Parents' Association (Qld) Inc. submission IP559.

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Participation in tertiary education and/or training decreases proportionally with distance a student lives from such a facility. Relocation costs and other costs associated with studying away from home are two of the major barriers to participation in tertiary education by rural and remote students.

Such an allowance needs to be easily accessible by rural and remote students seeking to undertake tertiary education and/or training.

The current criteria required to access Youth Allowance precludes many students from obtaining it. Of this cohort of ineligible students, some never undertake any form of tertiary education as it is financially beyond their means.

In other instances, the parents of these students borrow from a financial institution as a means of funding their child's tertiary education. At a time when rural debt in Australia is running at an all-time high, this cannot be considered a suitable option. However for some families it is the only alternative other than to deny their child a tertiary education.

It is farmers who need to make business decisions that will make them profitable and competitive. The Government's role is to set the right policy environment to support this outcome for farmers and across industries.

In order to make such business decisions, farmers need to be able to afford an appropriate education for their children. Children living in rural and remote areas are the only cohort of children in Australia who DO NOT HAVE equity of access to a continuing and appropriate education.

Unsurprisingly, many areas of policy affect agriculture, including tax, education and training, foreign investment, environmental law and industrial relations among others. The Government is taking a whole-of-government approach to this White Paper process because only a comprehensive approach to all of the policies that impact Australian agriculture can help the sector be prepared for the opportunities and challenges that lie ahead.

A comprehensive and whole-of-government approach needs to be constructed from the ground up and must include the provision of education for the next generation of Australia's agricultural producers. As can be clearly demonstrated, population decline is attacking many rural and remote communities like a slow and creeping cancer. One of the major causes of this population drift is families seeking better educational opportunities for their children. Two major contributing factors are no or poor internet access for the support of the distance education curriculum and the enormous financial burden of sending children to secondary and tertiary education.

Young people, including those in rural and remote Australia, should have access to a comprehensive education.

The current discrimination experienced by rural and remote families who have no choice but to fund their children's access to education should cease. All Australian families should have access to a funded education which will meet the needs of their children.

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E.G. For a family with three children living in rural and remote Queensland without daily access to a high school can expect to pay in excess of \$272,000.00 to fund the secondary education of their children. This figure is based on the average boarding and tuition fees of Queensland Secondary Boarding Schools at the rate current in 2014 and assumes that the family will receive the maximum rate of both state and federal government education allowances. **This figure is obviously an after-tax figure so the gross income of this family which would have to be apportioned to secondary education costs could well be in excess of \$400,000.00.** Lack of affordable access to education is preventing many families from residing in rural and remote areas.

While recognising the financial burden of education on regional families, the Government considers that public funding should be balanced between individual assistance and investment in agricultural education generally.

These children are the only ones who in Australia who do not have reasonable daily access to a government funded education. It is not appropriate to expect government to provide schools within reasonable proximity of all Australians. Where this is not feasible governments must fund access for students to an appropriate and continuing education.

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