

Thursday 27 February 2014

Mobile Coverage Programme  
Department of Communications  
Email: mobilecoverage@communications.gov.au

## **Mobile Coverage Programme – Submission from RDA Hunter**

Dear Programme Manager,

The Regional Development Australia (RDA) Hunter Committee and Chair, Dr Gaye Hart AM, appreciate the opportunity to make this submission in response to the Mobile Coverage Programme Discussion Paper.

### **Introducing RDA Hunter**

RDA Hunter is the peak economic development organisation for the Hunter in New South Wales. Funded by the Australian and NSW State Governments, our activities are also supported through project grants and financial contributions from regional partners. We focus on collaborative activities, programmes and initiatives under three strategic themes: Infrastructure, Innovation and Investment.

The RDA Hunter Committee is representative of the region's leaders from industry, business, education, local government and community groups. RDA Hunter leads initiatives and supports stakeholder activities to deliver:

- Economic growth and Productivity gains;
- Jobs and the Skilled Workforce for the future;
- Federal and State agendas at a regional level;
- A single voice for Australia's most productive region; and
- Independent and impartial advice directly to governments.

### **The Hunter - A Region of Opportunity**

The Hunter is New South Wales' major region for economic activity which encompasses 11 local government areas: Dungog, Cessnock, Gloucester, Great Lakes, Lake Macquarie, Maitland, Muswellbrook, Newcastle, Port Stephens, Singleton and Upper Hunter Shire. *(See Attachment 1: Map of Hunter Region)*

The vision for the Hunter is a region that continues to grow and be recognised nationally and internationally for high quality products and services, well-connected



liveable places and a collaborative business culture that supports innovation to deliver Australia's largest regional economy.

The Hunter:

- Gross Regional Product for 2011-12 of \$36.9 billion to make it Australia's largest regional economy;
- Contributes more than 8 per cent of Gross State Product and 2.6 per cent of GDP;
- A population of almost 651,000 in 2012 and a projected population of at least 750,000 by 2030;
- In 2012-13, in excess of 148.8 million tonnes was traded through the Port of Newcastle, including 142.6 million tonnes of coal exports, with a total trade value of \$19.10 billion;
- Annually produces upwards of 60 per cent of the State's electricity; and
- Increasingly accesses the internet via mobile devices. In 2012, 93 per cent of Hunter residents had a mobile phone and 63 per cent were able to access the internet with their mobile phone.<sup>1</sup>

RDA Hunter commissioned Deloitte Access Economics to analyse economic data and report on possible impacts of various trends and scenarios on the future of the Hunter. In *Prospects and challenges for the Hunter Region – a strategic economic study*<sup>2</sup> it is estimated that by 2036, the Hunter's economy will have grown by almost 75 per cent, to deliver a Gross Regional Product of \$64.8 billion.

### **Mobile Coverage Programme**

We feel it is important to be clear that RDA Hunter's submission in response to the Government's Mobile Coverage Programme Discussion Paper is from the perspective of a regional economic development organisation. RDA Hunter is not a telecommunications engineering firm, nor a mobile communications service provider. Therefore, we are not in a position to provide advice regarding technical aspects of some proposed options for the Programme such as: the specifications for base stations; or the likelihood of provisions for sharing base stations to influence the commercial decision-making of mobile network operators; or the estimated costs of supporting open access requirements.

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<sup>1</sup> Hunter Valley Research Foundation, 2012: Information and Communications Technology Use in the Hunter

<sup>2</sup> The Deloitte Access Economics report is available at: <http://www.rdahunter.org.au/> under "Initiatives".

**RDA Hunter supports the policy to improve mobile coverage** in the expectation that this will support economic growth through the delivery of benefits to residents, businesses, service organisations and visitors. We contend that funding Mobile Network Expansion Projects and Mobile Black Spots Projects in the Hunter is needed and will deliver value for money.

Even with base station service coverage guided by the Northern American Bell 90/90 rule,<sup>3</sup> a majority of Hunter mobile phone customers report, at some time, service coverage difficulties. These unhappy, annoying and potentially serious experiences may be due to: topography, natural and built environmental features; weather conditions; congested usage; or perhaps local government's base station regulations. Call drop outs, the inability to make a call, poor quality connections and being unable to connect to a server are commonly and widely reported across the Hunter.

Despite reliable coverage in the surrounding area, service irregularities include having no capacity to make a mobile phone call or send a text message from inside one's home. This suggests the **appropriate minimum quality service indicator** for community areas would be better if the condition for measurement of received signal indication changed from being "outside premises" to "inside premises". (Q2)

Beyond 'patchy' service and call interruptions there are "blackspots" in the region. Without suggesting in any way that this is an exhaustive list, some locations to consider for stakeholder support under the Mobile Black Spots Project programme, include:

- Along the M1, north and north-west of Fassifern and around Cooranbong;
- Caves Beach and Dudley areas;
- Between Fern Bay, Bobs Farm and Salt Ash near the Newcastle Airport;
- West and south-west of Cessnock inc. Wollombi, Laguna, and Howes Valley;
- Morpeth, the Paterson District, including Clarence Town, Tocal and into the Barrington Tops;
- Upper Hunter Shire, inc. Ellerston; and
- A1, Pacific Highway north of Karuah.

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<sup>3</sup> Connecting Regional Australia: The Report of the Regional Telecommunications Inquiry (2002)

The Member for Paterson, The Hon Bob Baldwin MP and Parliamentary Secretary for Communications, Mr Paul Fletcher consulted residents and business people in Paterson, NSW at the end of January this year. Issues that were canvassed included; mobile coverage across the Paterson District; the lack of mobile coverage at Tocal College and the historic Homestead tourism destination; the need for improvements along the region's road networks and opportunities to expand mobile phone coverage as National Broadband Network facilities are constructed.

The Mayor of Upper Hunter Shire, Cr Michael Johnsen, has requested community input to identify priority areas for better mobile coverage, saying, "With major transport routes such as the New England Highway and the Golden Highway running through the Upper Hunter Shire, we should aim to reduce mobile phone black spots."

Funding to improve mobile coverage along major roads and the rail network in the Hunter will assist the region to efficiently meet its goal of being the regional economic growth leader in NSW. RDA Hunter requests that planning for mobile network expansion in the region takes into account future growth and infrastructure upgrades such as:

- Hunter Expressway coming on-stream;
- Pacific Highway improvements;
- Golden Highway upgrades and capacity improvements;
- New England Highway developments;
- Bucketts Way enhancements;
- Huntlee 'new town' development;
- Continued population growth in Maitland, the fastest growing Hunter LGA; and
- Newcastle CBD revitalisation.

In closing, RDA Hunter presents two emerging factors for additional consideration as the assessment criteria for funding are finalised.

**The emergence of a mobile-only population.** In the Hunter, 28 per cent of residents surveyed in 2012 planned to replace land-line phones and internet connections with mobile only services at home.<sup>4</sup> Beyond a count of the number of premises located within new coverage footprints, will it be possible to identify how many premises will be 100% reliant on the mobile service for their phone and internet access and to add weight to areas with more of these premises?

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid, HVRF, 2012 including reference to Australia-wide trend as reported by ACMA



**BYOD – Bring Your Own Device.** An increasing number of Hunter high-schools are expanding the options for students to participate in BYOD initiatives. New base stations that can deliver support for educational institutions should receive additional weight during the assessment process.

On behalf of RDA Hunter, thank you again for the opportunity to contribute our response to the Discussion Paper. If you have any questions or would like further information, please call me on the office number 02 4908 7300.

Yours faithfully

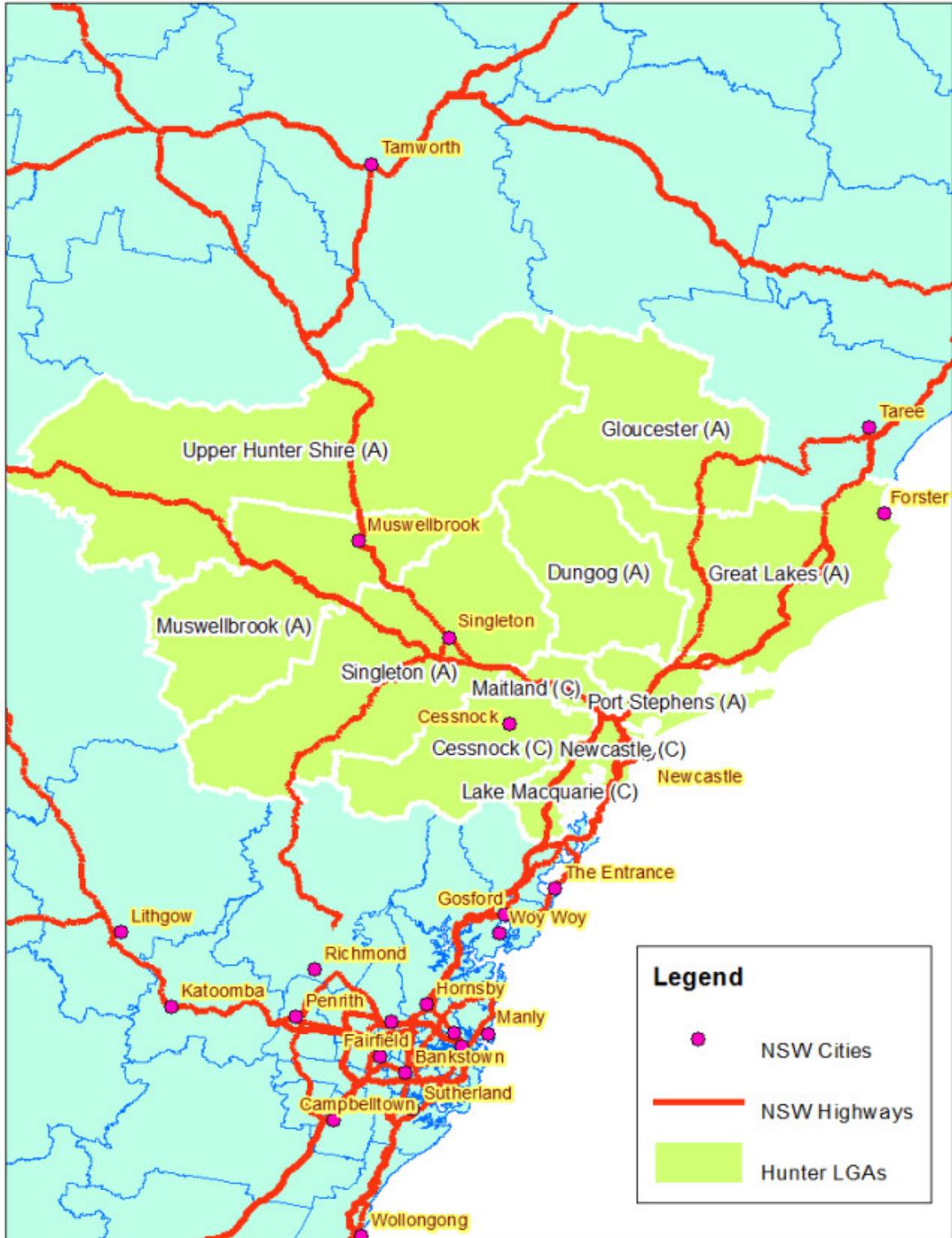
A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Todd Williams".

Todd Williams  
Chief Executive Officer  
RDA Hunter<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> "This submission was produced by RDA Hunter and does not necessarily represent the views of the Australian Government, its officers, employees or agents."

# Attachment 1: Map of Hunter Region



0 10 20 40 60 80 Kilometers

