

5 November 2010

Department of Broadband, Communication and the Digital Economy
GPO Box 2154
Canberra ACT 2601
Australia

Re: Discussion Paper on the Implementation of Universal Service Policy for the transition to the National Broadband Network environment

The National Farmers' Federation (NFF) was established in 1979 and is the peak national body representing farmers, and more broadly, agriculture across Australia. The NFF's membership comprises all of Australia's major agricultural commodities. Operating under a federated structure, individual farmers join their respective state farm organisation and/or national commodity council. NFF also has a number of associate members who participate in the agricultural supply chain. These organisations form the NFF.

Australian farming underpins domestic food consumption and is a significant export industry. There are 140,704 farms in Australia, and farmers occupy and manage 54% of Australia's landmass. In 2008 Australian farm exports were valued at \$31 billion, accounting for approximately two-thirds of Australia's agricultural production. Despite deep and widespread drought, over 2007-08, agricultural product accounted for 15% of Australia's merchandise exports. Exports are projected to grow to \$32 billion over 2009-10. Australian agriculture currently produces 93% all food consumed domestically in Australia and 1% of all food consumed in the world.

Effective information and communication technology infrastructure and services are of paramount importance to rural Australia, and to the benefits that an efficient, internationally-competitive farm sector brings to the Australian economy. In rural and regional Australia telecommunications also plays a major role in reducing the hazards and managing the impacts of natural disasters such as bushfire and flood. Access to communication technologies plays an important role in linking isolated communities, with benefits to the emotional wellbeing of individuals.

Broadband and other telecommunications services play an integral role in ensuring the agricultural sector is equipped with the tools to provide the food and fibre for our nation into the future, as well as other applications such as improved management of water use and benefits for water quality.

The NFF has continued to pursue government and telecommunication providers to achieve the goal of increased profitability and reduced input costs for farmers. Rural and regional Australians need, and are entitled to, equitable telecommunication services and service quality

– and the NFF maintains a constant ‘watching brief’ to ensure governments guarantee ongoing access to both.

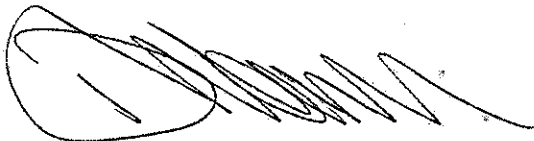
The NFF has sought to ensure that rural Australians – including those in the most remote areas of the country – have secure access to telecommunication service as well as upgrades to these services. It is important that rural Australians are not disadvantaged, and that services are delivered to rural Australians at metro-comparable prices – meaning they are equitable and affordable.

It is also important that the level of service and access to communication technologies are maintained. Like all most sectors of the economy, Australian agriculture is heavily reliant on telecommunications to carry out business and overcome the tyranny of distance. The existing standard telephone service, along with the existing copper networks which supports its delivery, remains a key service and infrastructure for rural Australians.

Without clear commitments to ensure agreed levels of service companies simply will not invest in rural areas, deeming them commercially unviable. These commitments are required to ensure that rural families, communities and businesses – including our farm sector, which supports 1.6 million Australian jobs – are not ‘left behind’ just because, in some cases, the profit margins aren’t as great as they are in metropolitan areas.

The NFF asserts it is the role of government to facilitate through, where necessary, a robust legislative framework, the delivery of quality equitable telecommunications services in a competitive marketplace and, where this is not achievable, for Government to intervene through strategic telecommunications infrastructure incentive programs.

Yours sincerely

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

MRS DENITA WAWN
Chief Executive Officer (Acting)