

Digital Connectivity

Northern Australia Priority: Our Business, Trade and Investment Gateway / Infrastructure to Support Growth.

State Electorate: Cairns / Barron River / Mulgrave / Cook / Hill / Traeger / Hinchinbrook

Federal Electorate: Leichhardt / Kennedy

Council: All FNQROC Councils

Priority Recommendation

FNQROC seeks equitable Digital Connectivity in the region to support economic development (tourism and agribusiness), safety (those on our roads), health, education and social wellbeing.

Project Overview

An equitable communication network for the region is essential if FNQ is to have sustainable growth and development. The size of FNQ means we are reliant on our communication networks whether this is mobile, broadband, fixed wifi, wifi or satellite. To be competitive in current marketplaces (National and International) and drive increased productivity and access to greater economic opportunities through a global marketplace our communication network is essential. FNQ has vast untapped potential for the development of an array of 'Agri Business', tropical expertise and tourism products which can be exported from the region. An equitable communication network will also support efficient and effective transportation (i.e. automated vehicles), employment, government service delivery, education, health, workplace health and safety and social wellbeing.

In terms of fixed broadband quality, quality level A (where at least 80% of the premises have access to high quality fibre to the premise (FTTP) services), this currently applies to only 34,000 premises in northern Australia. This represents 5% of premises in North Queensland. In terms of quality level D and E (the lowest), 90% of premises in North Queensland fall into this category⁶.

Australia's internet services are currently supported by an ageing copper network which requires considerable maintenance and provides for inferior service to that provided in much of the rest of the world. The NBN will significantly reduce download times for content with high bandwidth requirements and will offer speeds much faster than is currently possible. There is also considerable concern that, while satellite services will deliver broadband to many areas that currently don't have it, and that it should improve speeds significantly, the network will remain far inferior to that covered by the fibre footprint.

Infrastructure Australia's Infrastructure Plan (2016)⁷ identifies that in terms of mobile coverage, mobile services in regional Australia are not as accessible as in our cities. Without better mobile services, regional Australia will not fully benefit from new technologies and the associated business opportunities and better service delivery. For example, mobiles (and other technology) enable remote control of agricultural tasks including monitoring soil moisture, supplying water to drinking troughs for cattle and opening and closing gates.

Mobile coverage also means a quicker response to car accidents and greatly assists in fighting bushfires, floods and other natural disasters. Mobile access is important for regional tourism as visitors expect to have mobile services where they go.

⁶ Infrastructure Australia (2015) Northern Australia Audit – *Infrastructure for a Developing North Report*. Canberra: Australian Government

⁷ Infrastructure Australia (2016) Australian Infrastructure Plan – *Priorities and reforms for our nation's future Report*. Canberra: Australian Government

Digital Connectivity (Cont.)

The cost of backhaul is directly related to the capacity required to supply mobile services and the distance of the backhaul link. The cost of this capital is enough to discourage providers from building their own network, thereby denying services to some regions or limiting consumer choice. The NBN is investing in backhaul infrastructure as part of delivering broadband infrastructure in the region. This infrastructure could also be used by mobile network providers, to expand their coverage in more regional areas.

As Infrastructure Australia aptly puts it, technological improvements and innovation can transform industries and open up opportunities for regional business.

Providing equitable communication networks will create innovations that will help overcome geographic challenges and are particularly relevant to FNQ.

This will also greatly assist in closing the gap on access to health, education, training and employment opportunities for many socially disadvantaged groups, including people in indigenous communities and people with disabilities.

Key Strategic Drivers

Economic	Identifies the strategic policy, projects and investment required to support continued economic growth and activity.
Social Enterprise	Establishes a shared vision in support of improved quality of life for the community.
Employment	Provides foundation for a strong economy supporting ongoing employment opportunities and growth.
Tourism	Establishes a shared vision for continued regional tourism branding and diversification.