

6 April 2017

Mrs Lucy Wicks  
Chair  
Joint Standing Committee on the National Broadband Network  
Submitted via email: [nbn.joint@aph.gov.au](mailto:nbn.joint@aph.gov.au)

## **Re: Inquiry into the rollout of the National Broadband Network**

### **Introduction**

Cotton Australia is the key representative body for Australia's cotton growing industry. The cotton industry is an integral part of the Australian economy, worth over \$1.3 in export earnings for the 2015-16 season, and employing on average 10,000 people. The industry's vision is Australian cotton, carefully grown, naturally world's best. We welcome the opportunity to speak on behalf of cotton growers on this issue.

### **Executive Summary**

#### **The key issues facing cotton growers are:**

- The data limits of Sky Muster plans under the Fair Use Policy do not reflect the needs of growers running high-tech agricultural businesses.
- The highly variable reliability and performance of NBN services, particularly Sky Muster, restricts the ability of users to rely on the service for business needs.

#### **Cotton Australia recommends:**

- SkyMuster plans should be increased to reflect the residential, educational and business needs of regional, rural and remote Australians.
- Continual improvements are still required to improve the reliability of Sky Muster services.
- Broadband standards should be established to protect services and customer service guarantees and safeguards should be updated.

### **The Regional, Rural and Remote Communications Coalition**

Cotton Australia is one of the founding organisations of the Regional, Rural and Remote Communications Coalition (RRRCC), and we support the recommendations contained in the RRRCC's submission. The breadth and number of organisations involved in this Coalition highlights the critical nature of telecommunications for regional, rural and remote Australians.

### **The high-tech reality of modern agriculture**

Alongside the rapid development of technology in Australia, is the rapid development of farm-specific technologies including 'smart' farming applications. Technology is no longer a luxury, but a necessity to conduct a modern day business able to compete in global markets, as Australian cotton growers continue to do with more than 99% of the crop exported each season.

Telecommunications services do not just underpin basic communication between people anymore, but essential business activities. For example, on any given day a cotton grower may rely on telecommunications to communicate with employees, to complete online banking, to participate in online trading, to monitor weather conditions, to receive real-time updates from on-farm sensors, to upload aerial drone footage and data, to remotely monitor and control irrigation systems, to access data from machinery and so much more. Some cotton growers even lease office spaces in local townships to ensure access to the reliable telecommunications services required to conduct their businesses. Information is critical to a farmer's decision making process, particularly real-time information which assist growers to make well-informed decisions with farm efficiency and productivity ramifications.

Australian cotton growers lead the way in efficiency and productivity, and to continue to do so must be able to take advantage of the opportunities these new technologies present. Access to reliable and fit for purpose telecommunications services are vital to facilitate this uptake, and are an essential for anyone living and running businesses in rural Australia.

### **Sky Muster**

Many cotton growers operate in areas serviced only by Sky Muster. Unfortunately these growers have had varying experiences with reliability and capacity issues affecting their ability to rely on Sky Muster services to run their businesses.

Some growers have even chosen not to connect to Sky Muster services due to its perceived low quality and unreliable service, and will instead continue to depend on mobile data packages. It is important to highlight that while this is possible for some, many of those serviced by Sky Muster do not have access to a strong and reliable mobile signal and Sky Muster is their only internet service option.

A key issue identified by our members are the capped data plans available as part of Sky Muster. These plans do not reflect the needs of regional users, especially those running high-tech agricultural businesses. While we acknowledge Sky Muster's capacity is not infinite, Sky Muster should only be for those with a genuine need for the service, and those on Sky Muster should have access to data allowances reflective of their needs.

A committed road map of how Sky Muster capacity will evolve to allow for increased data is needed as consumer data use continues to grow exponentially each year. Additional and alternative technologies are required and must be continually investigated as technology improves to ensure NBN services are able to meet residential and business needs now and into the future.

### **Cotton Australia recommends that:**

- Sky Muster plans should be increased to reflect the residential, educational and business needs of regional, rural and remote Australians.
- Continual improvements are still required to improve the reliability of Sky Muster services.

### **Broadband Standards and Consumer Safeguards**

Reforming consumer safeguards to ensure they are relevant to the needs of consumers is vital. Cotton Australia understands that the current consumer safeguards will be reviewed this year.

Updated service guarantees are required to reflect the needs of consumers and businesses and should include a review of connection and repair timeframes, reliability and performance levels.

There should be clear standards, benchmarks, accountability and clarity around wholesale and retail service provider responsibilities. Incentives to comply in the form of penalties and end user compensation should be implemented.

**Cotton Australia recommends that:**

- Broadband standards should be established to protect services and customer service guarantees and safeguards should be updated.

**Conclusion**

Cotton Australia considers that there is still some way to go before the NBN is able to meet the needs of regional, rural and remote Australians. In order to improve the current state of regional telecommunications services, it will be important to align existing inquiries and reviews for more comprehensive outcomes.

Cotton Australia would welcome an opportunity to provide further information on its position. For more information, contact Claudia Vicary, Graduate Policy Officer at [claudiav@cotton.org.au](mailto:claudiav@cotton.org.au)

Yours sincerely,



**Claudia Vicary  
Graduate Policy Officer  
Cotton Australia**