



20th September 2019

Regional Connectivity Section
Department of Communications and the Arts
regionalconnectivity@communications.gov.au

2 Phillip Law Street, Canberra ACT 2601
GPO Box 2154 Canberra, ACT 2601

Dear Sir / Madam,

RE: Riverina and Murray Joint Organisation (RAMJO)

Submission on the Regional Connectivity Program Discussion Paper

Thank you for the opportunity for the Riverina and Murray Joint Organisation (RAMJO) to make a submission in response to the Discussion Paper on the Australian Government's Regional Connectivity Program.

RAMJO Profile

The Riverina and Murray Joint Organisation is a cooperation of eleven (11) Member Councils in southern NSW and operates under NSW *Local Government Act 1993*. Member Councils include Albury City, Berrigan Shire, Carrathool Shire, Edward River, Federation, Griffith City, Hay Shire, Leeton Shire, Murray River, Murrumbidgee and Narrandera Shire.

These Councils cover an area of nearly 75,000km² and a population of 150,000 people. The southern part of the region extends along the Murray River, from Albury City Council at the eastern end through to the Councils bordering on the far west, including Murray River and Edward River. The northern part of our region extends generally from Griffith City Council across to the regional Shires of Carrathool and Hay in the west. A regional map showing Member Councils boundaries is attached for your information ([Attachment A](#)).

The RAMROC region has a mix of large regional centres, medium sized irrigation based towns and urban shires, through to a number of predominantly dryland farming shire areas, large in size but with a low population base.

The major regional centres are Albury City (pop 53,767) and Griffith City (pop 26,882). There are many and varied small, medium and large scale business across the region, with most stemming from an agricultural base. The region is home to several university bases and tertiary institutions, while maintaining its role as an important food and fibre source for Australian consumption and for export purposes. The region produces a wide range of summer and winter grain crops, fruit, vegetables, horticulture, viticulture, dairy and livestock. Agriculture directly employs 30,000 in the region, which is 37% of the total regional employment.



RAMJO's Purpose

With an overall goal to *"increase diverse population growth within RAMJO"* Member Councils are committed to collaborating effectively to enhance the economic, social, economic and environmental capabilities of member councils and communities, to ensure their long term sustainability, resilience and prosperity.

RAMJO has three integral functions including: intergovernmental collaboration, identifying strategic regional priorities and advocacy. The RAMJO Board, comprised of General Managers and Mayors of each Member Council, along with State Government representation from relevant Departments (namely Office of Local Government and Department of Planning, Industry and Environment), has identified the Digital Connectivity as one of the six strategic regional priorities for our communities.

RAMJO's Contribution to the Regional Connectivity Program Discussion Paper

General Input

It was pleasing to see that the Discussion Paper identified areas of concern and opportunities for connectivity improvements which align with RAMJO's findings in this space. In particular, the need for the network to be complemented in some areas with bespoke, place-based solutions to deliver on a Universal Service Agreement for all Australians.

Several months ago, RAMJO undertook a community wide survey with the findings demonstrating a clear message from communities around feeling disadvantaged when compared to other Australian citizens. This survey was specifically designed to nominate locations of significance where connectivity was lacking. RAMJO would be more than happy to share the findings of this research with the Department of Communications and the Arts.

With ongoing water security and affordability issues, many businesses and farming operations in RAMJO are attempting to become as efficient as possible. This includes accessing programs and applications to assist in water management and day to day operations. The issue remains that with lack of significant coverage and reliability, many of our businesses cannot access these measures to assist with adaptation and innovation now and into the future.

In New South Wales, regional economic development is now a critical platform of the State Government through the NSW Regional Development Framework and associated Regional Growth Fund programs. As identified in the background of the discussion paper, and by the RAMJO Board, digital & mobile connectivity is now recognised as a critical enabler to accessing education, government services, online banking, etc. In line with attempting to grow our regions, attracting industry or strengthening the current economic base of these communities will require improvement and investment in the connectivity space.

Furthermore, with our areas suffering economically from drought, many health services have created interactive online services such as mental, financial and physical health apps, services and websites. Unfortunately for some of our residents, these services are not accessible, and even for those who have connectivity, common complaints around congestion from 3pm until 10pm remains a core frustration.



Specific Input on Key Design Principles

Question 2, Page 6: Should other parties, for example local government authorities, business organisations or industry groups, be allowed to lead a bid for Regional Connectivity Program Funding?

RAMJO supports the proposal for local government entities, including Joint Organisations, to be able to lead a bid for Regional Connectivity Program Funding. As per the background information in the discussion paper, RAMJO believes the most effective means to deal with the gaps in connectivity services and reliability are a range of bespoke, place-based solutions. These solutions could be best led by a local government entity, such as a Joint Organisation or an informal grouping of Councils, in collaboration with a licenced telecommunications carrier.

To this effect, RAMJO has a range of input provided by residents in our areas, including common routes travelled, cross roads, rural properties, etc. where service is not currently available. As identified in the discussion paper, the current national mobile network providers claim to provide mobile coverage to more than 99% of the population (i.e. premises), however in reality, this represents only 32% of the landmass. RAMJO believes there are critical transport routes, industry hubs and other enabling infrastructure which do not have sufficient access to connectivity to operate as effectively as competitors where connectivity is satisfactory.

Question 2, Page 6: Are there other organisations besides the local, state and territory governments that could be considered 'trusted sources of information' for the purposes of identifying local telecommunications priorities?

Yes. Joint Organisations in NSW have been set up for this very purpose (map of Joint Organisations is also at Attachment A). To identify common strategic regional priorities for our populations and to represent a collective set of information and identified critical enablers for future regional success. RAMJO and other Joint Organisations could be nominated to act as a bid leader for a collective of local government authorities (as digital connectivity is broader than council boundaries), or possibly as a support to local government applications.

Question 5, Page 7: Are there any comments that you wish to make in relation to co-contributions?

As per question 11, the Australian Government should consider a third category for highly localised solutions up to the value of \$2,000,000 which do not require co-contribution from the applicant, where they are a local government entity or a Joint Organisation. This is due to the existing budget constraints and the willingness to assist in creating and delivering solutions for the nation that would otherwise be unfeasible without the support of the Australian Government and national network providers.

Question 6, Page 7: What type of projects should be considered for funding through the Regional Connectivity Program?

Projects which demonstrate improved reliability and capacity and are bespoke or place-based. An example identified by RAMJO is a set of criteria allowing individuals to apply for in-home boosters. Criteria could include whether they run a business, or whether they have children or others studying



at home, or where people are under care for a medical condition. These were some of the common areas of concern identified via the RAMJO community and business survey.

RAMJO sees this as a stop-gap measure to improve the connectivity of these isolated and/or disadvantaged individuals until such time that a larger network solution is established. RAMJO believes it could assist the Department of Communications and The Arts in administering and implementing such a program.

Question 11, Page 9: Is there a case for a third category, for highly localised solutions for projects that, for example, are seeking funding of less than \$200,000 GST inclusive?

Absolutely. RAMJO sees this third category as imperative to enabling an environment for creative, be-spoke solutions where a business case for large and wide-ranging infrastructure does not demonstrate value for money. Working with local governments and Joint Organisations will allow these highly localised solutions to be co-created with community needs in mind.

Summary

RAMJO appreciates the opportunity to provide this submission to this discussion paper and would certainly be pleased to provide more detailed information and comment if so required. RAMJO will continue to seek to improve the mobile and digital connectivity of our residents via cooperation with Commonwealth and State Governments, and with licenced telecommunication providers.

For all further comments and enquiries, please contact:

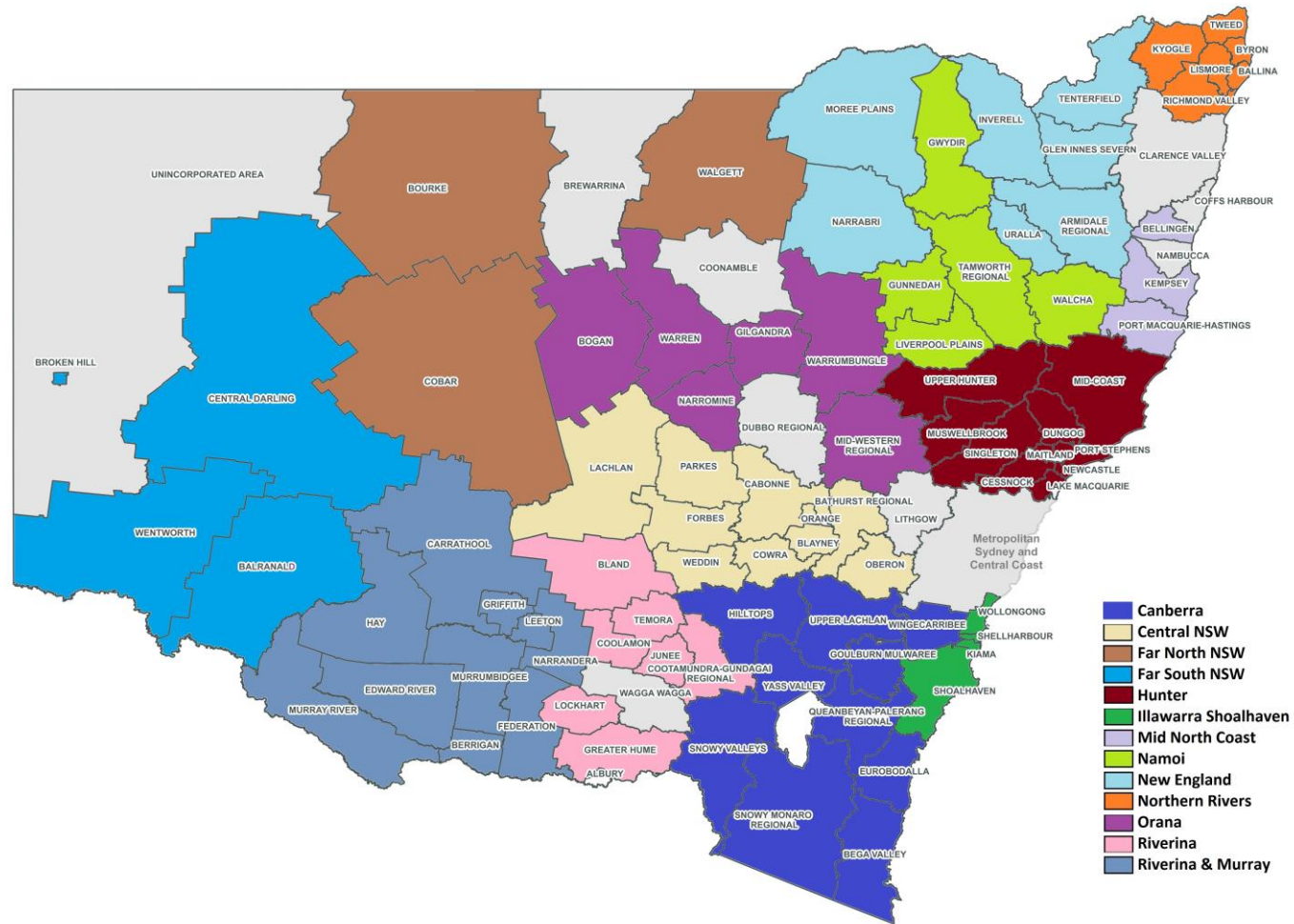
[Redacted contact information]

Yours faithfully,

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Attachment A – Joint Organisation & RAMJO Maps





Attachment A – Joint Organisation & RAMJO Maps

