



rural & regional.au/for all?

The Information Policy Advisory Council (IPAC) was established by the federal government in August 1996 as a high-level advisory body on on-line information and communications services and technologies. Its role is to investigate and provide advice to the government on the full range of social, technological and regulatory issues emerging from the rapid development of on-line services, particularly the Internet, and their increasing use by governments, businesses and other sectors of the community. IPAC will also identify priorities and provide options for action on such issues by governments, industry and other stakeholders in the on-line economy.

Report

IPAC recently released its first report, *rural & regional.au/for all*. This report considers the development of on-line infrastructure and services development in regional and rural Australia and presents 23 recommendations, addressing issues such as:

- defeating the tyranny of distance;
- developing a services-driven approach;
- releasing the technology potential;
- introducing a competitive framework;
- accessing digital connectivity;
- empowering communities;
- putting government on-line;
- charting the path forward; and
- ensuring leverage and impact from the Regional Telecommunications Infrastructure Fund.

In the Foreword to the report, IPAC comments that 'For the shrinking number of Australians who live there, rural Australia is today a landscape of diminishing opportunity, high costs, poor services, and often real

IPAC members

- **Dr Terry Cutler (Chairman)**, Managing Director, Cutler & Co
- **Mr John Thame**
- **Mr Mark Needham**, Manager, IT & Telecommunications, Canegrowers
- **Mr Gary Sturgess**, Principal, Sturgess Australia
- **Mr Andy Macdonald**, Chief Government Information Officer, Office of Government Information Technology
- **Mr Eric Wainwright**, National Library of Australia
- **Ms Jenifer Hooks**, Acting Executive Director, Film Victoria
- **Ms Amanda Harkness**, Director, Strategy, Telstra Multimedia
- **Dr Greg Clark**, President, Technology Group, News Corporation
- **Mr Michael Begun**, Managing Director, Michael Begun & Co
- **Mr Daniel Petre**
- **Mr Michael Grant**, CEO, IMAGO (Multimedia Centre)
- **Dr Denise Wood**, Director, Optcom South Australia Inc
- **Ms Mara Bun**, Manager, Policy & Public Affairs, Australian Consumers' Association
- **Mr Bob Savage**, Managing Director, IBM Australia

hardship... The members of IPAC have a vision of Australia where everyone is 'location independent' in terms of access to affordable services, closeness to each other and to the worlds of learning, commerce, healthy living and entertainment'.

The report is summarised, in its Overview, as one that 'concerns job opportunities, new business opportunities, regional development and a fully integrated, 'location independent' Australia.'

While the report uses quite emotive language in its descriptions of communications possibilities and the plight of rural Australia, its fundamental investigations and recommendations reflect what is, largely, recognised as a reality in non-metropolitan Australia. That is, regional markets do not have access to the communications technologies that metropolitan markets take for granted. Further, the importance of such technologies in regional and rural Australia is growing, as on-line services gradually replace or supplement services such as banking and finance, education and health.

Strategies

In its Autumn 1997 issue of *Reform*, the National Farmers' Federation (NFF) comments that 'For rural industries to prosper in a deregulated environment and compete in international markets up-to-date information is vital, as well as information and advice from a range of sources to allow the best business decisions. Access to a quality telecommunications network is a key component of the infrastructure required to support such business activities and attract new industries and enterprises to rural centres.'

rural & regional.au/for all proposes a number of strategies for the



federal government to ensure that services such as the Internet are made available to rural Australia. The report addresses what has been the primary delay in the delivery of such services - cost. It notes that, increasingly, distance should no longer be a factor in determining cost and that the technology is available to cater to all of our needs. The report provides a comprehensive audit of on-line developments in regional and rural Australia, addressing delivery mechanisms (infrastructure and technology), on-line applications and services, government activities and regional organisations, and research and development.

The major strategic directions highlighted in the report relate to making competition work in regional and rural Australia and stimulating demand for services by regional users. Dr Terry Cutler, IPAC's Chair, has commented that '[t]he unacceptable alternative is a continuation of a limited duopoly for urban Australia, and for rural users, an ongoing monopoly with prohibitive prices, and a continuing failure to introduce new on-line technologies to overcome the tyranny of distance.'

Government's role

The report requires government, industry and regional communities to adopt the recommended strategies and work together to achieve the location-independent and affordable services proposed for all Australians. Much reliance is placed on the government to progress IPAC's recommendations, with many of the report's recommendations specifically targeting the government to put in place a strategic framework to realise the future pictured by IPAC.

For example, the government is called upon to support and promote the development and deployment of on-line services, to stimulate demand in regional communities, to recognise the potential of telecommunica-

IPAC Terms of Reference

The Information Policy Advisory Council (IPAC) has been established to advise the Commonwealth government on strategies addressing on-line information and communications services, and related matters, that are significant to Australia's prosperity within a global information economy.

The Council will provide policy advice and recommendations on strategic issues relating to information and communication services, identify priorities and elaborate options for action on such issues by governments, industry and other stakeholders in the on-line economy.

These issues might include, but are not limited to:

- the development of the on-line information and communications industry in Australia including attention to the drivers of, and impediments to the take up of new services;
- Australia's role in the global information society and on-line economy;
- the application of on-line information and communications services in areas such as education, health, social services, and the delivery of government services;
- access to on-line services, particularly in regional, rural and remote areas;
- the legal, regulatory and commercial implications of new on-line and communications services, such as security, privacy, authentication, copyright, consumer affairs and content regulation; and
- requests for advice on specific matters referred to the Council by the Minister for Communications and the Arts.

In undertaking these tasks, the Council will:

- establish links to bodies and organisations in other countries addressing similar issues;
- draw on the expertise of its members and their links with the on-line services industry;
- secure industry inputs on specialist issues where appropriate;
- undertake consultation with the broader community and the industry sector;
- advance public debate;
- coordinate with other Commonwealth government bodies conducting related investigations;
- where necessary, engage consultants and commission research that is essential to the comprehensive understanding of matters under consideration;
- publish information and issues papers and make them freely available in electronic form; and
- encourage and facilitate the participation of its member in public forums.

tions competition in regional Australia, and to provide incentives to agencies to deliver services on-line.

IPAC also calls upon the government to take all possible steps to help ensure that all Australians have affordable access by 2000 to a standard of digital connectivity roughly comparable to the current service functionality of ISDN (recommendation 14). This reflects the major recommendation of the Standard Telephone Service (STS) Review Group: that a digital data capability should be reasonably accessible to all Australians on an equitable basis by 2000. Like the STS Review Group, IPAC does not propose mandating a particular technology and is conscious of the rapid technological developments and decreases in connectivity costs that such developments can bring to the more remote parts of Australia, subject to the right regulatory and industry development policy settings.

Participation

IPAC's recommendations in rural & regional.au/for all may be considered to be idealistic. However, it is important that serious consideration be given to them by the government so that non-metropolitan Australians may also benefit from the exciting social, economic and educational activities of the future. The NFF notes that with the decline of many small communities, 'a strong telecommunications network will give people in these communities the ability to enjoy a reasonable quality of life and participate in our technological society.... Telecommunications is the means of accessing many other services that are either being withdrawn in rural areas of are not of a comparable quality to urban areas, hence there is a substantial financial and social cost in not having access to such a service.' □

Sue Ferguson