



DEC 16 2020

MR. RONALD BONNETROUGE
MLA, DEH CHO

Oral Question 447-19(2): Extending Cell Phone Coverage Response

This letter is in follow up to the Oral Question you raised on November 02, 2020, regarding extending cell phone range beyond communities. The Department of Municipal and Community Affairs (MACA) has and will continue to support the ongoing discussions with the Department of Finance who are actively involved with the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC).

The Department of Finance has highlighted an increased need for cellular service along major roads and highways and alternate technology for emergency communications as a priority to the CRTC and Industry Canada and will continue to explore partnerships with industry and other levels of government to improve cellular services to residents. Given the high costs associated with the implementation and operations of these mobile networks, it is anticipated that only incremental service improvements can be expected through the leveraging of existing technologies. The Government of the Northwest Territories (GNWT) is, however, optimistic that new technologies on the horizon, such as low earth orbit satellites, may present new opportunities to address the challenges faced in the Northwest Territories (NWT).

At present, there is limited cellular coverage along highways in the NWT, with services typically ending a short distance outside municipal boundaries. The infrastructure and funding for ongoing operations required to expand cellular coverage along territorial highways is provided by private telephone companies, who assert it is not economically viable to do so. Operating costs over the life of these assets would greatly outpace capital costs, which is why these projects have been deemed uneconomical. Service providers also cannot increase subscriber levels enough to pay for the operating costs. Early order of magnitude estimates for this work exceed \$110 million.

Cellular coverage in remote areas and highways is not uniquely an NWT issue and is an issue common among other jurisdictions across Canada. In CRTC's 2019 Communications and Monitoring Report, it was reported that advanced wireless networks, such as Long-Term Evolution (LTE) networks, covered 87% of Canada's major roads and highways at the end of 2018, leaving approximately 14,700 kilometers without LTE coverage.

.../2

Given the challenges in expanding cellular coverage, MACA is working to educate residents on 9-1-1 areas of coverage and investigating alternative means of contacting 9-1-1 from un-serviced areas. For wilderness travel and time on the land, it is anticipated that expanded cell coverage would not offer much additional protection in those instances. Residents are encouraged to take advantage of personal satellite-based emergency beacons, such as SPOT transmitters, which are affordable and reliable. Individuals who plan to spend time on the land are also encouraged to practice preparation and planning in case of an emergency, such as making travel plans known to others, bringing equipment that is in good working order, and travelling with extra fuel.

Thank you for your interest on this important issue.

Sincerely,



Paulie Chinna
Minister
Municipal and Community Affairs

c. Mr. Tim Mercer
Clerk of the Legislative Assembly

Mr. David Hastings
Legislative Coordinator
Department of Executive and Indigenous Affairs

Ms. Eleanor Young
Deputy Minister
Municipal and Community Affairs