

St. Submission on Proposed Amendments to the Telecommunications USO Determination 2023

Dear Sir/Ma'am

We live on a remote cattle property in Central Queensland, in a well-known broadcast and mobile “shadow zone”, resulting in no mobile coverage at the homestead or at our outstation 24 km away. Terrain blocks every nearby tower, and there are no viable alternatives such as Starlink or Wi-Fi at the remote site. Because of this, power-independent telephone services are not just convenient for us — they are essential for safety.

We have two service locations: the homestead ‘xxx’ and a satellite yard known as ‘yyy’. ‘yyy’ is frequently used when mustering, checking fences and waters, and by recreational users including sporting shooters and fossickers. As the land is leasehold and gazetted as a ‘Recreation Reserve’, we have no authority to restrict public use. The site has no power and no other communications of any kind. It is the only way to call for help if something goes wrong, and it directly affects our duty of care to both workers and recreational visitors.

At the homestead, power outages are common after storms and can last from several hours to several days. During these periods we lose all communications, including Starlink, email, and any internet-based calling. The proposed expectation that rural customers should install and maintain their own solar-battery backup systems to keep a replacement service functioning is not only financially unreasonable, it is fundamentally flawed. We have no way of knowing whether such a backup system is operational until the moment a power failure occurs, and if it has failed, we have no means of reporting the fault or seeking assistance. This is a narrow-sighted solution that does not reflect the realities of remote life, and it effectively removes our right to an equivalent and reliable standard of service.

Around 2–2.5 years ago, the radio phone at ‘yyy’ stopped working. When we reported the fault, Telstra’s remote tests showed the service as “working”, and we were told the problem was our responsibility. We were charged monthly fees for a service that could not be used. We attempted fault-finding, but coordinating test calls over that distance — where the unexpected is the normal — made it impossible to confirm the nature of the outage while continuing to be billed for a non-service. Eventually, we had no option but to disconnect the service as it was unviable to continue paying for something that did not work.

Recently, a Telstra technician attended the tower to install anti-climb infrastructure and noted a fault in the tower equipment due to a failed component. This confirmed that the service had not been working due to Telstra’s infrastructure, not ours. It also confirmed that the earlier diagnosis was incorrect, and that the disconnection only occurred because the fault was never repaired. This experience highlights how vulnerable remote customers are when providers rely on remote testing that does not reflect real-world functionality.

Mobile or VoIP services cannot replace our radio phones. At the homestead, the nearest usable tower is around 70 km away, and the closer tower is completely blocked by the Drummond Range. Even with a high-gain Yagi antenna pointed slightly off-bearing to “skirt” a hill, the signal is marginal and unreliable. The only mobile signal is several kilometres away and halfway up a rocky hill (after navigating a barbed-wire fence). At the remote site, there is no power and no mobile coverage at all. This is grossly unacceptable in an emergency situation. Do not underestimate the ongoing stress this places on remote families

working in challenging terrain, with unpredictable animals that can and do cause injury, in baking outback Queensland temperatures, with the frequency of simple breakdowns such as flat tyres — and **no way** to access emergency assistance. This is a basic duty-of-care issue that cannot be met by the proposed alternatives. Any replacement that requires mains power, solar, batteries, or Wi-Fi is simply not viable in such situations, yet the need is unassailable.

For these reasons, I am concerned about the proposed amendments that would allow providers to refuse supply where “adequate power is not available”, or to treat provider-initiated technology migrations as if the customer had requested them. These changes risk leaving remote properties like ours without any safe or functional communications. The USO exists precisely because remote Australians cannot rely on the same technologies as urban areas, and because power-independent services are often the only option. What we have described is not unique to our family or business.

I ask the Government to ensure that the USO continues to protect remote and off-grid users, and that no provider is permitted to withdraw essential services unless a truly equivalent, power-independent, terrain-appropriate alternative exists. Our experience shows how easily remote customers can lose critical communications through misdiagnosis, infrastructure failure, and assumptions about technology that simply do not hold in rural Australia. Do not underestimate the additional challenges and risks to remote families or treat our safety as a secondary concern.

I cordially ask you to carefully consider the information presented.

Sincerely,

A real family who deserve the same level of service as every other Australian