On Farm Connectivity Program Round 3 Consultation

Submission on behalf of the Regional Tech Hub

Thank you for the opportunity to provide feedback on the proposed Round 3 of the On-Farm Connectivity Program.

As outlined on the Department's website, the objectives of the Program are to:

• Extend digital connectivity to enable primary producers to leverage advanced farming technology.
• Enhance a primary producer's capacity to implement digital agribusiness solutions through improved connectivity.
• Support access to new communications equipment by offsetting some of the cost.

General Comments

The proposed changes for Round 3 appear to place greater emphasis on improving on-farm connectivity infrastructure, compared to earlier rounds, where the majority of funding supported the purchase of AgTech equipment.

This shift is welcomed. AgTech solutions are only as effective as the connectivity supporting them. Strengthening connectivity across farms will not only enable more reliable use of current equipment but also create a stronger foundation for producers to grow sustainably over time.

These changes will also encourage producers to consider their entire farm connectivity setup. While universal solutions like point-to-point Wi-Fi bridges and mesh systems are relatively straightforward, moving towards more specialised technologies, such as LoRaWAN versus NB-IoT, will require producers to think more strategically about future use cases and the specific needs of their properties.

Concerns and Suggested Solutions

1. Shift in application responsibility from suppliers to producers
- **Concern:** This change may lead to delays in processing and could pose a barrier for producers with limited digital literacy or inadequate existing connectivity.
- **Suggested Solution:** Provide a clear, easy-to-follow application guide and ensure adequate preparation time before the grant round opens. This will allow producers to seek advice and engage suppliers.

If re-engaged, the Regional Tech Hub is well-positioned to support producers through the application process, but may require additional resourcing to meet increased demand and case load.

2. Department-led price caps on equipment

- **Concern:** Price caps based on average unit prices may not account for the diverse range of equipment available, each with distinct specifications. Additionally, farm connectivity requirements vary greatly, one-size-fits-all price caps may inadvertently disadvantage certain producers.
- **Suggested Solution:** Establish an independent industry expert panel to advise on pricing frameworks. The Regional Tech Hub could contribute to this panel, providing guidance based on real-world producer experiences.

3. Upfront payment model with the rebate issued later

- **Concern:** Requiring producers to pay for equipment upfront may disadvantage smaller producers with limited cash flow. Ironically, many of those facing the most significant connectivity challenges, particularly in remote and rural regions, are least able to absorb these costs.
- **Suggested Solution:** Consider flexible funding mechanisms, such as staged payments or allowing supplier-led applications to be submitted in parallel with producer-led ones. This could ease the financial burden and ensure broader participation.

Closing Remarks

The Regional Tech Hub strongly supports the aims of the On Farm Connectivity Program. With careful refinement of the funding model and administrative processes, Round 3 has the potential to significantly improve digital connectivity outcomes across regional, rural and remote Australia.

We look forward to continuing to support this important work.

Warm Regards

On Farm & Small Business Connectivity Coordinator

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