

## 2021 Regional Telecommunications Review

Submission by [REDACTED]

We live in Mount Franklin, Victoria, about 10km from Daylesford. Our nearest fixed line exchange is in Yandoit, about 10km away, so ADSL is not an option. The area has 4G mobile coverage by Telstra (from a tower in Daylesford) and Optus (from a tower on Mount Franklin). There is no fixed wireless service, despite the area being included in the original NBN rollout plan, it was never built and disappeared from the NBN plans in 2018.

This means we have two choices for Internet access – 4G or satellite. Our business requires working over Zoom and so does our charity work. We decided to stick to 4G and have had to acquire both a Telstra and Optus service in the hope that when one doesn't work, the other will. Whether or not video will work at all depends on the day of the week and time of day. It is usually ok in the morning on weekdays, but hopeless on weekends and most afternoons and evenings. Everything has become much, much worse since the pandemic started with more people working from home, watching Netflix and Daylesford becoming flooded with holidaymakers that would have normally travelled further afield.

In the last 12 months we had to mostly do voice only meetings, as video was either unavailable or would freeze constantly. In addition, Telstra had several unplanned 4G outages in the area, which led to us making complaints to Telstra. On one occasion we had to revert to 3G for a few days to get any reception at all. Whilst Telstra will offer financial compensation, the service quality does not improve.

Optus is mostly more reliable where we are, but download speeds go down to 200-300kps most evenings and weekends. For Telstra, it will go down to dialup speeds most weekends, sometimes Daylesford is so overloaded with visitors that our Internet just stops altogether.

There are several issues we would like to have addressed by the review.

1. The carriers clearly give preference to mobile phones over USB modems. In fact, support for USB Modems is now almost non-existent. Most USB Modems are class 6 devices, limiting data speeds. When placing a phone next to the USB Modem, the phone will usually achieve a 2-3 times higher mobile data speed. But you cannot connect a WiFi router and network drive to a phone, the only option is to use a USB modem to build a home office network (or get specialist router with built-in modem, which would lock you into Telstra).
2. Given that the reduction in capital expenditure by the carriers now means that outages are becoming a regular occurrence, the industry (government) should mandate an automatic redress scheme for residents in outage areas. Why do I have to make a complaint for every outage to get compensation? Since most people will not be making complaints, the pain of outages is entirely with the network users while the providers do not have to care (and they don't).
3. Usage of mobile networks has changed to become much less voice centric, but mobile data capacity in high-usage areas has seemingly not adapted. Daylesford is clearly an unusual place, as the population doubles or even triples most weekends. But this is not new, Daylesford has

been the top domestic tourism destination in Victoria for many years now. Telstra should have adapted its network accordingly. The recent NBN rollout in town does not seem to have made any dent in mobile usage, as I mentioned above, our situation is worse, not better. The outlying areas are disproportionately affected by this lack of investment, as our signal strength is much worse than in town, so data rates are already lower anyway.

4. Neighbouring areas such as Glenlyon, Wheatsheaf and Guildford somehow managed to get fixed wireless services as part of recent mobile tower installations and upgrades. There is an obvious option to put fixed wireless on top of Mount Franklin and cover a large area that is not currently covered due to the hilly terrain. Since there is already an Optus tower there, there should not be a planning or community issue as in other areas.
5. There needs to be a backup for emergencies. We had a power outage that led to a total loss of mobile service when there was a sizeable bushfire burning in Hepburn Springs a couple of years ago. Our only option to get information was to drive up to Mount Franklin as there was still mobile service available up there. We were not on our own, there were 6 cars with locals parked hoping to stay updated via the Vic Emergency app.

As the carriers only care about shareholder returns, they are not going to invest in regional areas unless told to do so. We expect the government to act on this urgently. This means further investment in fixed wireless and in data capacity for high-usage areas.