

## **Submission: 2021 Regional Telecommunications Review**

### **Background**

We reside in NSW, within Bathurst Regional Council area, at Wisemans Creek, near the border with the Oberon LGA, and have access to fixed voice services and satellite broadband internet but **no** mobile voice and data access,

We don't consider that we are excessively remote but, we are subject to bushfire threats, isolation by flooding and suffer frequent electrical blackouts.

We are an elderly couple and I receive a subsidy on my electricity bill because I use a CPAP life support system. I also have heart and blood pressure issues, osteoarthritis (2 hip replacements) but am still active in farm duties and do volunteer work for the Rural Fire Service and Surf Life Saving.

In all these circumstances, reliable communications are essential, indeed, potentially life threatening.

### **Key Issues**

Proceeding now to the key issues and the associated questions.

### **Adequacy**

#### **Changing Demand**

Mobile: At Wisemans Creek, we are apparently in the 0.5% not covered by any of the mobile service providers. No 3G, no 4G and no 5G. Similarly, our neighbours, and the newly commissioned Fire Station, have no mobile service reception. VoIP is of little assistance due the close proximity required to internet access.

Broadband: Satellite broadband is OK for email and web browsing provided that downloads are small. Large downloads like movies, streaming services and zoom are not available as unlimited download packages are not available, or are extremely expensive.

We are also Foxtel satellite subscribers, so are able to keep up to date with world news, but free to air TV, with our only source of local news, is available via direct transmission. This is normally OK but is weather dependant. In some weather conditions local news cannot be received. It seems that there is no technical reason that free to air TV cannot be delivered by satellite, to provide better reliability of service, but is not available because we have the wrong postcode!

Fixed Voice: Fixed voice is the most reliable form of communication available to us but is frequently impacted by power outages. In the event of power outages most modern phones don't work and internet connection is not possible. We plug in an old touchtone handset to make/receive phone calls during power outages. Power outages are to be expected during natural disasters like bushfire.

1. What telecommunications services are required in regional Australia to meet current and future needs? Are there any things regional communities and businesses need to do, but can't, on their existing services?

Improved mobile coverage.

Greater satellite download capacity at reasonable cost.

Can't participate in Zoom meetings.

2. What changes in demand, barriers or challenges need to be addressed when it comes to telecommunications services in regional, rural and remote Australia?  
Availability of reliable, cost effective communications especially during natural disaster situations.
3. How have the Government's policies and programs affected telecommunications service outcomes in regional, rural and remote Australia? How can these be improved?  
There have been great improvements to rural and regional telecommunications as a result of Government policies but there is still a lot to be done.

### **Service Reliability**

As stated in the Issues Paper, "The reliability of fixed-line, mobile and satellite networks is critical in regional, rural and remote Australia..." and "Access to networks is of limited value if they are not reliable..."

4. How do service reliability issues impact on regional communities and businesses?  
How do outages, including in natural disasters, impact on communities and businesses?  
The impact of outages on regional communities can be critical and even life threatening. Examples include, calls for help, rescue or supplies, in cases of fire, flood or medical emergencies.  
In wildfire situations, vehicles require reliable communications to call for back-up assistance, specialist rescue assistance, medical evacuation, situation reporting or resupply of equipment. Fire Stations require reliable communications to task firefighters, call-up volunteers or assistance from other stations and Ambulance service as well as relaying fire status. Our RFS Fire station does not even have mobile phone reception!
5. How might such impacts be addressed to ensure greater reliability? How can the network resilience be addressed in regional areas.  
The way to address these impacts and improve network resilience is through establishing redundancy as no single technology can provide fail-safe communications.  
Mobile Phones have poor coverage in remote locations, UHF Radio has very limited range especially in hilly country, HF Radio is subject to corruption due to weather events and Sat-phones do not work well under vegetation cover. Hence the need for use of multiple technologies in situations of natural disasters.

### **COVID-19**

6. How did the use of digital services change for regional consumers and businesses during the response to the COVID-19 pandemic? What insights for future service delivery does this provide?  
Covid highlighted the need for greater download capacity for satellite broadband. Large files are needed to allow effective work from home, or business decentralisation, to reduce stress on other infrastructure, such as transport. Zoom meetings are commonplace but require considerable download capability.

### **Indigenous Australia**

7. What can be done to improve the access and affordability of telecommunications services in regional, rural and remote Indigenous communities?  
I have nothing to contribute.

## **Opportunity**

### **Regional Development**

As the Issues Paper states, it is a fact that, “Alongside energy and transport infrastructure, access to telecommunications is becoming increasingly critical to attracting and supporting new investment opportunities in regional areas.”

8. How can investment in telecommunications infrastructure work with other programs and policies to encourage economic development in regional Australia? and,
9. What role could innovation, including new models, alternative investors or new ways of doing business, play to encourage investment in regional telecommunications infrastructure? What are the barriers?

As for the future, the task of the infrastructure provider is not to foresee, but to enable it.

### **Emerging Technologies**

## **Awareness**

### **Education**

### **Public Information**

I am not adequately qualified or experienced to express any meaningful comments on these subjects or on questions 10 to 16.

## **Conclusion and Recommendations**

As has been stated throughout this submission, effective and reliable communications are critical to life in rural and remote areas especially during times of natural disaster when communication could be the difference between life and death, as was empathised to me during my time as Chairman of the Communications Advisory Committee of the RFDS (NSW). This comment is still valid today!

Similarly, effective and reliable communications are essential to accommodate the trend of working from home, or decentralisation of businesses, to relieve pressure on other infrastructure such as transport, power and water.

Recommendations highlighted in this submission are:

1. Continue to expand coverage of the mobile networks to include more regional communities, particularly those supporting emergency services facilities.
2. Enable greater satellite broadband capacity, at reasonable cost, to allow work from home in area not serviced by fixed line broadband. There is also a strong need to download larger files and allow zoom or similar meetings to encourage business to the regions.
3. Remove restrictions on access to free to air TV via satellite in rural areas.



