



RESPONSE FROM THE MACDONALD VALLEY ASSOCIATION (MVA) TO THE 2021 REGIONAL COMMUNICATIONS REVIEW. Sept. 2021

INTRODUCTION

The MacDonalD Valley Association (MVA) represents and advocates issues and interests for the residents of the MacDonalD Valley, a geographic area spanning some 45km from Wisemans Ferry to Higher MacDonalD and Mogo Creek and taking in Wrights Creek and Webb's Creek. The area is a rural/remote community in the Hawkesbury Region. The area is under 100 klms and 2 hours from the centre of the city of Sydney. Although remote it is still part of Greater Sydney. The MVA provides a link to engage the community with the tiers of government agencies, councils and authorities. Ours is a community that has had to develop resilience over decades and, by necessity, takes responsibility for supporting each other, working together with an eye to our community's safety, its needs, priorities and a sustainable future.

Local regional characteristics pose singular challenges in cases of emergencies and disaster scenarios, for example remoteness, accessibility issues and communications (noting the absence of mobile coverage). The main access and only sealed road access to the valley is via the Webbs Creek Road Ferry, and main Wisemans Ferry which are prone to sudden closure in emergencies for a week or more.

For example during the early 2021 floods The Macdonald Valley was without power, land lines, the ferries had stopped running and no mobile phone reception except in a few odd places, ie the Central MacDonalD School which is only useful when the flood waters do not cut our residents off from each other. We also had no bulletins from the SES, these cut off at Wisemans Ferry.

Without connection to " the outside world" and lack of information the restoration of electricity and phone lines was put on hold because there was no data about areas no longer being flooded and ferries back operating.

This flood took an unusual amount of time to recede, We ended up with groups of residents cut off from each other as bridges and causeways flood.

The only information and assistance we could get was from the SES and RFS co- ordinating via their radio contacts and posts on face book from our local police.

We were able to get food drops, as the water receded, and some were delivered to properties isolated by flood waters.

Even the Telstra back up battery in the Village of St Albans had to be run by a generator, with fuel brought in by helicopter. Which could not find anywhere to land during the floods, so could not be fixed

The 2016 Census provides the following snapshot of our community:

- Permanent Residents: 600 approx. (with about the same number owning 2nd homes in the valley and not permanent)
- 350 private dwellings
- 140 families
- Median age 50.5

Existing Communications Infrastructure



Mobile Service

There is no mobile reception in most of the 45km length of the valley. The valley was acknowledged by the Federal Government six years ago as a Mobile Black Spot.

To date, Optus has failed to deliver on Round 2 Optus funded project (MBSP2- NSW-028) announced in 2017, meaning that for multiple fire seasons and flood events the community's isolation has continued. Optus have suggested a small cell placed at the St. Albans Fire shed which will provide 50% less coverage than a Macro cell that was originally committed to according to above guideline. As a minimum all Funded base stations must provide at least 10 square klms of new or upgraded handheld coverage for Macrocell base stations and at least 5 square klms for Small Cell Base stations.

Optus 's answer "To clarify, The Federal Govt., is aware of and has approved the delivery of a micro satellite coverage solution to the St. Albans community and is satisfied the solution fulfills the requirement of the program" So the Govt., seems to have accepted this without recognition of community, bushfires, floods, emergencies etc.

The MVA believes that Optus should be held to account and install a solution that gives as much coverage footprint as possible, as per that originally offered.

For example the area was severely affected by the 2019/20 Bush fires and in fact the Gospers Mountain fire started in a remote area of the MacDonald Valley. The area was on red alert for most of Nov/Dec 2019 and January 2021 with residents evacuated and roads closed. Infrastructure and communications were cut or severely compromised during this extremely dangerous period.

Telstra has also now been granted funding for macro cell coverage in Lower MacDonald although, to date, nothing has been delivered. If delivered it will support only localised communications in an area with patchy existing network.

The closest macro-cell tower is at Wisemans Ferry with coverage extending along the Macdonald Valley for only a few kilometres and only then along the banks of the river.

Beyond that, a small Telstra cell has recently been placed at the MacDonald Valley Public School in Central MacDonald with an approximate 200m coverage. This also stops working during power cuts.

A fibre optic connection has also been placed at the school, by the State Govt., at great expense, but is only available for those attending the school. Students still have the issue they cannot get reliable coverage from home to conduct their homework.

Landline Service

Telstra's landline infrastructure is unreliable, with poor maintenance of lines suffering abrasive destruction of protective sheathing by trees and branches, lines taken down during high winds, storms, fires and floods. Many lines have fallen off poles, sit on fences or on the ground (in some cases for years) and are regularly taken out by trucks. There is regular ongoing failure of the local exchange and lines in critical emergencies.



Landline services are provided from an exchange, some 2km to the north of St Albans Village gaining service from a Microwave repeater from Wisemans Ferry 24 km to the south. A fault with the repeater at either end will also cut landline services.

During power cuts Telstra land line services (and ADSL internet) now cease after 6 - 14 hours as Telstra has not maintained a back-up generator at the local 4568 exchange. Power failures are frequent and increasingly prolonged in duration. The entire valley lost power for 4-7 days during the 2020 and 2021 floods meaning that residents had no way of confirming their welfare status or calling for help. Some residents are elderly e.g. in their 80's and live alone and at least one we know of was cut off by flood waters for some weeks. Which with her health problems was an extremely difficult situation.

In addition to power outages, other landline issues (to date unexplained by Telstra) have resulted in recent phone and ADSL internet outages of between 3 and 5 weeks.

The landline infrastructure also is not sufficiently reliable to support community safety and welfare in emergencies. Residents from higher up the MacDonald Valley sometimes have to drive 20-30kms to make emergency mobile calls when the landline infrastructure has failed them.

There have been 3 known incidents in recent isolation events where emergency triple 000 calls could not be made for 15 hours, resulting in one known near death in the valley.

ADSL Internet

ADSL internet is limited by close proximity to the exchange and is also subject to the issues of Telstra's infrastructure mentioned above. Only properties within 2 – 4 km of the ST. Albans village can achieve useable ADSL (with speeds of 0.6– 8MB/sec being normal) but it frequently drops out (every few hours) for up to an hour and is not useable in the periphery at weekends.

Telstra now refuses to supply new properties beyond the village with ADSL because of its own acknowledged slow speeds and unreliability.

Satellite Internet

The "NBN" (sic) solution in the MacDonald valley has been via individual property satellite connection to the Sky Muster satellite. This is only possible in areas where the valley is wide enough to allow satellite coverage. In many cases the terrain prevents satellite connection or at least creates poor coverage allowing only intermittent connectivity. Smoke and/or clouds block the signal as well as weather events in other areas affecting bandwidth.

Satellite internet cannot be used for phones or any 2-way communication due to extreme latency (time delay) problems and increasing bandwidth problems (now providing slower speeds than ADSL) coming from the satellite with increased users. Satellite internet is also metered and is not affordable for many residents in the valley.

UHF

UHF, regarded mainly as a line-of-sight communication, is used by some residents in pockets of the valley area. Consisting mainly of small hand-held radios, these are limited groupings without the benefit of linking together in a community Residents Radio Network in times of emergency need.



Communications Infrastructure Failure – ACTION: comprehensive overhaul and investment

Failures are impacting life safety and the community's resilience. Ongoing landline phone failures through floods, fires and day-to-day lack of mobile phone coverage were a point of feedback in the MacDonal Valley Association Wellbeing Survey 2020, highlighting impacts on wellbeing. Where 86% of respondents stated mobile reception was poor, or very poor and 69% stated internet reception was poor or very poor.

Since the advent of the Covid lockdowns it has become more important that people are working from home and children have had to be home schooled, this has meant an overload on the area's internet coverage, which it has not been able to sustain, so these figures are now a lot worse than at the time of the Wellbeing survey in 2020

- **Landline** – The community has a failing and unreliable landline service. Telstra, in the experience of the community, is failing its Universal Service Obligation (USO) and not delivering their obligation for 'giving customers access to a reliable telephone service that has good voice reception and ensures connections and faults associated with this service are undertaken and repaired within a reasonable time.' Consumer safeguards

- **Black Spot Mobile** – Optus has failed to deliver on Round 2 Optus funded project (MBSP2- NSW-028) announced 2017, meaning that for multiple fire seasons and flood events the community's isolation has continued, contrary to the Minister's and programs promises.

- **UHF (CB) Radio** – An initiative by community is to create a backbone of a UHF (CB) radio network networking of isolated residents. UHF is limited in range and requires relay infrastructure to support coverage which we will have to seek funding for.

- * **Internet.**

Under Digital Inclusion which should be available for all areas and resident.

For example Zoom for business meetings, wellbeing exercise classes, managing equipment guidelines. etc.

Telehealth for Doctor/Medical consultations.

These all have an effect on the wellbeing of the communities', health and work.

PROMISES MADE BUT NOT KEPT:

For natural disasters it was recommended that the area have installation of communication networks by Govt., and Telstra. Failure to meet these objectives under USO obligations is a failing for all those concerned.

In 2016 Optus made a commitment to provide us with a large cell installation for mobile coverage which has not come to fruition and now they are only going to provide a small cell installation which will be of benefit to only a few in its limited coverage of only 400 m.

They have clearly not honoured their commitment and as yet have not specified the site they are reviewing, and their statement about people not wanting a mobile tower in their back yard is unsubstantiated

Telstra also were going to place a small cell installation at the top of the village on council land at Espie Street St. Albans but that has now been withdrawn.



CONCLUSION

Surely , as small a place as The MacDonald Valley is, we are entitled to coverage like everybody else, less than two hours from Sydney and as you can see from the last flood and fire issues the telecommunications reliability is of paramount importance in emergencies.

We did in fact have a case of a local nurse spending 9 hours trying to get a critically ill patient airlifted to hospital, in the recent floods, she was literally going from property to property as reception dropped out. Any longer may have resulted in the death of the patient.

The MacDonald Valley Association has been lobbying for many years to secure better telecommunications for our community in conjunction with support from Susan Templeman, Federal MP.

It seems ludicrous that mobile reception is available in the middle of the Simpson Desert where there is nothing and yet the MacDonald Valley is denied that basic right.

We require an urgent call for action by the Government, Telstra and Optus to fix the issues named above.

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