



## 2021 Regional Telecommunications Review Submission

30 September 2021

To whom it may concern,

This information is submitted for your review as part of the 2021 Regional Telecommunications Review to share our experience. We have two working parents in our family, one on farm, one off farm and 3 school aged children, 14, 12 and 10 years of age.

We have been living on our farm for just over 11 years now and during this time we have seen significant change in the use of technology in all parts of our lives. The impact of being able to access this technology is significant for each and every one of us.

We live 30km from the major regional centre of Dubbo, 20km as the crow flies, yet are unable to access many of the services available to others. We are located in the Terramungamine / Rawsonville area north-west of Dubbo and are officially in a black spot for mobile telecommunications.

In 2014, with the progression of mobile phone usage, we purchased a Telstra Cel-Fi and Yagi Antenna at a cost of about \$2,000 to be able to better access mobile phone service at our house. We needed to do this given the increased reliance on mobile phones and to be able to access a limited amount of internet at the time. This also meant we could also connect to a Telstra internet data account where we paid \$70 a month to access about 10GB of data. In comparison at the time, in cities and towns, people could have unlimited data access for the same price delivered through the ADSL framework which was unavailable to us given the age and quality of our home phone line.

We ticked along, making do – at least having service in our house was a plus, and a bit of data available - even if it was extraordinarily expensive, however if the power goes out, so does mobile phone and internet service (no power, no booster, no service) so we have always had the home line as a back up if there was an emergency and we lose power, another ongoing expense for us.

Then NBN came along – yay for everyone, except those living on farms or outside of major town centres. We cannot access cabled NBN or wireless NBN – we were left with satellite NBN. Which was better than what we had, but still not satisfactory. Satellite internet is not the best quality internet with lag issues impacted how we can effectively use the service, and still we have limited data issues – 60GB per month for \$55.

So we ditched the \$70 per month for 10GB with Telstra (but kept our mobile phones with Telstra as we had the infrastructure here) and added the NBN Satellite service and things improved marginally – once again, in comparison, people in cities and towns had unlimited access to internet for the same

price and the quality of the services was faster and better – enabling better use of internet, but still a step forward for us.

However, during this time, the use of internet for all things (work and leisure) has exploded – streaming services, music services, technology for farming practices have all increased – even TV service are predominantly delivered through internet - great if you can access it, but crippling if you can't. We have been left behind given the substandard quality of service and limited data access and it has negatively impacted our lives. Our kids are also getting older, they have increased their needs for internet access for school and we come to the conclusion that 60GB per month does not stretch to cover a business and family of 5 for a month. So we needed to look for other options – Optus Mobile Broadband to the rescue!

About 3 years ago we added an Optus service to our growing list of services. The Optus service was patchy, but it gave the kids some data to be able to access the internet when it was working (200GB per month) and left the satellite service for the farming business to ensure we didn't run out during the month - how do we run a business with no internet these days?

Then the kids got older again and 18 months ago we needed to review – we knew that Optus provided better priced data plans – Telstra does not compare - \$70 per month for 500GB with Optus versus \$70 per month for 40GB with Telstra – but we had a Telstra antenna not an Optus antenna – so we made the decision to add an Optus antenna as overall it would be cheaper and give us better service – so up went an Optus antenna – another \$1,000 for us and a new plan for us – 500GB per month for \$70. And we were ticking along OK for a brief period of time and then ...

Something changed – about November 2019, a tower must have shifted or changed (perhaps 3G to 4G) and all of a sudden, our calls were dropping out regularly and suddenly we can't access data on our phones (through Telstra) and calls switching from 3G to 4G dropping!

We speak to the neighbours – we are always speaking to the neighbours to find out what the best solutions are and who is doing what – sharing the knowledge where we can – our neighbours had tried to upgrade their Telstra Cel-Fi booster and antenna to 4G but it didn't work – spent the money to be told that 3G would be better for them.

And then in March 2020 COVID-19 hits, really testing us – now we have a business to run, a working from home scenario and 3 kids home schooling – what a nightmare for our internet which was only hanging together by threads – it was not set up to be able to support our new situation. Once again, we are so far behind others the difference is now more noticeable than ever - calls dropping out, unable to access Zoom as we don't have the bandwidth etc – many calls to our local members trying to see what we can do – nothing! Put up with it, pay your pay and hope for the best.

Life goes back to somewhat normal, but now we are working from home and this is the new normal, at least with kids back at school the pressure is off the data use. Calls still dropping out, phones set to 3G only to make it work, but not able to access internet data on 3G so it's not ideal and a crappy work around.

And then we go into lock down again and we decide it's time to try an update to 4G to see if it fixes about calls dropping out. Fast forward and we have just spent another \$3,000 to upgrade to 4G boosters, get a second Optus antenna so we can have enough data (with another \$70 per month fee) for everyone to do what they need. Calls now work on 4G, but we still don't have good enough

service for mobile data with Telstra. This seems crazy in this day and age and given we have just spent \$2,000 to move to 4G and we still don't get data on the service.

Not to mention what is happening in paddocks – we used to have 3G service and could communicate while on the farm – now pretty much nothing - the change to 4G has stopped broad mobile access for farmers – we get less service driving to town – it constantly drops out – we have lost service in the last 18 months and it makes a difference in how efficient we can be and how we can communicate for both work and our personal lives. Our calls continue to drop out – we are constantly having to call again. We know that we used to be able to make calls (using 3G) in paddocks and on our way to town, however since the change to 4G, there are now complete dead spots and we have no service at all – the upgrade to 4G has delivered less service coverage for us and many more call drop outs due to towers changing.

We are now starting the process of setting up a petition and applying to Optus to build us a tower in our area (Telstra do not care – even though most of us have been customers for our lives as they have had the best - although still not great - service to date) so we are no longer in a black spot. We desperately need a tower to be able to better access technology without having to spend thousands on antennas etc – we cannot continue to wait.

But ultimately, we are left with an expensive patchwork of different solutions to try to piece together a reasonable framework for the house (no options for paddocks to be able to harness better practices), paying for the necessary infrastructure to get basic access and then paying three times the monthly amount to continue to have (not even equivalent) quality and access to our services.

However, the worst part is the precarious nature of our patchwork solution - all it takes is Optus or Telstra to slightly change one tower and our hodge-podge patchwork framework breaks and we are left having to spend significant money to get back to some sort of access. We hope we still get access for a while and the pending change to 5G doesn't make our 4G service redundant for us.

It just seems inconceivable that in 2021, living 20km from a major regional city, we are still unable to access the internet we need at a reasonable price to be able to keep up with the rest of the world when people in third world countries have full, unlimited internet access wherever they are. I thought we could do better.

Regards

Emma Tink on behalf of Emma & Brad Tink.

