

Mobile Coverage Programme Discussion Paper

Submission Cover Sheet

Submission Information

This cover sheet should be attached to submissions made to the Department of Communications in relation to the Mobile Coverage Programme Discussion Paper.

Contact Details

Name of respondent: [REDACTED]

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Date: 28 February, 2014

Confidentiality and privacy

All submissions and comments, or parts thereof, will be treated as non-confidential information unless specifically requested, and acceptable reasons should accompany each request. Email disclaimers will not be considered sufficient confidentiality requests.

Respondents lodging a submission should be aware that submissions (excluding any information agreed to be treated as confidential information) will be made publicly available, including on the Department of Communications' website. Submissions and comments will be subject to freedom of information provisions. Despite a submission being identified as confidential or sensitive, submissions may be disclosed where authorised or required by law, or for the purpose of parliamentary processes.

Do you want all or parts of the submission to be treated as confidential? Yes No

If yes, identify below which parts of the submission are to be treated as confidential (and provide a reason):

If the submission contains personal information of any third party individual, indicate on this Submission Cover Sheet if that third party individual has not consented to the publication of his or her personal information:

Submission Instructions

Submissions are to be made by **5:00pm (AEST) Friday 28 February 2014**.

Where possible, submissions should be lodged electronically, preferably in Microsoft Word or other text-based formats via the email address mobilecoverage@communications.gov.au

Alternatively, submissions can be sent to the postal address below (to arrive by the due date):

The Manager
Mobile Coverage Programme
Department of Communications
GPO Box 2154
CANBERRA ACT 2615

All submissions lodged will be acknowledged by the Department of Communications by email (or by letter if no email is provided). Respondents lodging a submission who do not receive acknowledgement of their submission should contact the Department. Submissions which are not acknowledged by the Department as being received may not be considered. Respondents should be aware that emails greater than 10Mb may not be successfully delivered.

Mobile Services Mobile Coverage Programme response Buloke Shire council

Continuous mobile connectivity is vital to Buloke Shire residents and businesses; this connectivity underpins resilience through access to critical health, education and business services. Productivity and competitiveness are increasingly reliant on continuous mobile connectivity.

Buloke Shire Council sees this as an extremely important issue for their LGA in line with the following excerpt from the *Council Plan 2013-2017*:

“1.3 Working with communities and other stakeholders to maintain and enhance a living environment where people feel safe, are connected to their community and are actively encouraged and supported to participate in community life.

Priorities

- Advocate for improvements to telecommunications infrastructure in the Shire include mobile telephone coverage, improved internet access and faster download speeds.
- Advocate to Commonwealth and State Governments for further improvements to rural addressing, including the use of contemporary technologies, to improve response times by emergency services.
- Continue to develop methods of communication and engagement with residents through the use of telecommunications, the internet and printed materials. “

The Buloke Shire is located in north-western Victoria, between 210 and 360 kilometres north-west of Melbourne, and has a population of 6,384 people (ABS 2011).

Buloke Shire is a predominantly rural area. The main townships are Birchip, Charlton, Donald, Sea Lake and Wycheproof. Smaller townships include Berriwillock, Culgoa, Nandaly, Nullawil and Watchem.

Buloke Shire encompasses a total land area of approximately 8,004 square kilometres. It is approximately 140 kilometres long and 60 kilometres wide. Two main highways, the Calder Highway and the Sunraysia Highway, run north and south through the Buloke Shire.

Land is used largely for agriculture, particularly grain production and sheep grazing.

The Loddon Mallee region is about 59,000 square kilometres in size. Buloke Shire represents approximately 13% of this area. The region is a significant food producer for Victoria, with some 12% of the state agriculture export dollars. Buloke represents some 7% of the region's agricultural output and is a productive dry land broadacre Agricultural community.

Remplan reporting shows the gross revenue generated by businesses and organisations in Buloke. The total output estimate for Buloke Shire is \$578.169 million. The comparative report shows the gross revenue generated by businesses and organisations in the Loddon Mallee Region, with the total output estimate for Loddon Mallee Region at \$27,833.991 million. Buloke's percentage of the overall revenue generation is 2%.

A significant issue impacting productivity in the Buloke Shire area is that farmers and rural contractors use mobile phones as their key communication tool in a number of ways:

- A safety measure to stay in contact when working in dangerous, solitary or isolated conditions;
- as an emergency services contact device;
- as general communications device with on farm employees and contractors;
- as a business tool to conduct commercial transactions and relay commercial information and services; and
- the use of mobile internet based applications.

Whilst the obvious problem is the lack of service, there are additional problems arise from mobile phone Blackspots. For example, when calls are directed to a message bank service they are subject to a retrieval fee for the receiver of the call as well as a call connection fee to the originator of the call. As noted below, the delay in messages being picked up can be up to 36 hours. Those rural consumers in mobile phone black spot areas or areas without adequate reliable coverage are at a substantial commercial, business and uncommon disadvantage to their competitors.

Our experience corresponds with the findings of the *2011–12 Regional Telecommunications Review*.

“The predominant concern raised with the committee by regional Australians is the adequacy of mobile voice and broadband services. This issue was raised in every regional consultation and in around two-thirds of the submissions received. It is clear there is strong unmet demand in regional Australia for an expansion of the mobile coverage footprint.”

Buloke farmers and other businesses, in common with more centrally based operations, are demanding broadband through mobile devices. Mobile communications are expected to play an increasingly important role in enabling participation in the digital economy.

This connectivity underpins liveability particularly community and commercial resilience through:

- Access to critical health and education services;
- Business productivity and competitiveness which are increasingly reliant on continuous mobile connectivity;
- Continuous mobile connectivity playing a greater role in social connectedness and community capacity;
- Ability to meet the requirement for more frequent emergency responses and recovery efforts due to climate change;
- Capacity to address emerging issues such as Bio security; and
- “Paddock to Plate” Quality Assurance in the livestock industry which is increasingly reliant on mobile connectivity.

Continuous mobile connectivity is playing a progressively greater role in social connectedness and community capacity. This is notable in the face of more frequent emergency responses and recovery efforts.

Mobile devices are increasingly used for social engagement and interactions, so mobile coverage is now a key factor in attracting and retaining staff in rural and remote areas, particularly younger workers

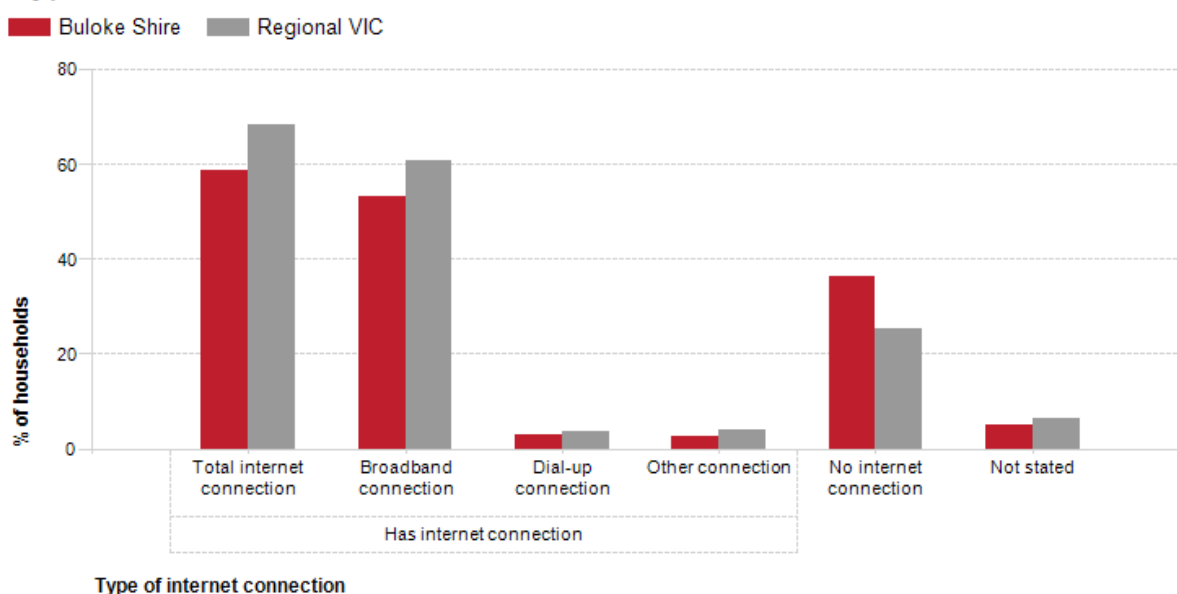
Regarding Buloke household access to information technology Data provided by the *Australian Bureau of Statistics for 2011 (below)* indicates that, while there has been an increase in the percentage of people who have access to computers at home. It is notable that the percentage of country people with access to the Internet has more than doubled since 1998, but has yet to reach the level of use in capital cities. While population decline can appear to skew the data, the increase in reliance on digital and mobile technology is clear.

Type of internet connection

Buloke Shire	2011			2006			Change
Connection type	Number	%	Regional VIC	Number	%	Regional VIC	2006 to 2011
Total internet connection	1,578	58.7	68.4	1,245	44.9	51.8	+333
Broadband connection	1,432	53.3	60.9	539	19.4	27.4	+893
Dial-up connection	81	3.0	3.6	687	24.8	23.8	-606
Other connection	65	2.4	3.9	19	0.7	0.6	+46
No internet connection	973	36.2	25.3	1,414	51.0	42.4	-441
Not stated	137	5.1	6.4	113	4.1	5.8	+24
Total households	2,688	100.0	100.0	2,772	100.0	100.0	-84

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, [Census of Population and Housing 2006 and 2011](#).
Compiled and presented in profile.id by .id, the population experts. (Enumerated data)

Type of internet connection, 2011



Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Census of Population and Housing, 2011* (Enumerated data)
Compiled and presented in profile.id by .id, the population experts.

As noted in *A Digital Divide in Rural and Regional Australia? (August 2001)* by Dr Jennifer Curtin of the Economics, Commerce and Industrial Relations Group “Looking at farms in particular it is evident that an increasing number have installed computers but significantly fewer have installed the Internet. There has however, been an increase in the percentage of farms connected to the Internet between 1997 and 1999. Recently, an Internet measurement firm found that rural and regional Australians were as likely as their city counterparts to trial an Internet service and had equally sophisticated computer set ups, albeit with slower modem speeds. They also found that while rural Australia was initially slow in taking up Internet connection, their uptake rate had since increased.(19) A similar trend is evident in the United States, where one of the most dramatic shifts that has occurred in the last three years has been the increase in Internet access by rural households which has occurred at all income levels.(20)”

These findings reflect the growing dependence on digital technology and communication in the agriculture sector. Fourteen years on, the shift to mobile application of this technology continues to reflect the sophistication and innovation evident in the approach taken by Buloke farmers and many local small to medium businesses servicing the sector.

The Buloke Shire is committed in several of its strategic plans to continue to advocate for the increase in telecommunication connectivity through a range of services including internet, mobile and satellite. Whilst there have been several planning permit applications from companies such as NBN, Ericsson, Vodafone and Optus for telecommunication towers not all of these have resulted in the developments going ahead. The internet capabilities mean that promoting the shire as a telecommuting destination would be dishonest and current connectivity results in an unquantifiable amount lost productivity for existing business within the Shire.

As noted in the Broadband for the Bush Alliance, *Better telecommunications for rural and remote Australians paper (June 2013)* “Rural local governments undertake more community service delivery functions than metropolitan councils to give their communities as many services as possible.”

Their remoteness introduces additional challenges in order to fully assist local businesses to engage in the digital economy and to provide timely and relevant information to residents regarding services. This includes providing timely information regarding emergency response and recovery as well as referral and engagement of critical family, aged and youth related services. In view of the shift to mobile connectivity as the primary communication tool among vulnerable young people this can be a matter of life and death.

Remote local governments must have digital wherewithal to participate in the digital information age. It is essential that strategies for online services and digital platforms, particularly continuous mobile connectivity are implemented to implement critical services and improve their efficiency

Issues impacting on continuous mobile connectivity are reflected in the following summations of anecdotal feedback asking for “your experience” with the current mobile service coverage. These comments mirror those made in many forums across the Shire.

While each experience has unique features and the experiences can be different for people in the same areas due to their individual equipment and set up, the common themes emerging reflect a system currently falling short of the growing dependence on mobile connectivity in the digital age.

Birchip

- My phone on Telstra and Optus is unreliable from 15 Kilometres North of Donald on the Donald Swan Hill Road until just 10 kilometres out of Birchip on the Birchip Donald Road. Optus does not work inside my house in Taverner Street Birchip and is only marginally better when you walk out on to the footpath.
- Telstra works fine at this location in Taverner Street both in and out of the house.
- Telstra only works in certain positions in both Watchem and Nullawil.
- Optus works OK in Nullawil
- Telstra cuts out from about Gil Gil east to Wooroonook on the Donald-Charlton Road. When purchasing a phone, most salespeople convey very little real knowledge to the customer about the ability of the phone to pick up a signal.
- It is also very difficult on the internet to find out the reception capabilities of a particular phone. This adds to the challenge for country people to get the best from the phone network.

Nullawil

- Extremely limited hand-held coverage in Nullawil Township.
- Key industry grain trading and value adding centre. Recently the Manager had to go out in 45 degrees Centigrade and onto the train line to get mobile service.
- No mobile coverage inside houses
- 1000 cars per day come through Nullawil on the Calder Hwy
- Impact on local garage and retail businesses
- Local fuel delivery business. When out in the farming area cannot receive call to the truck leading to lost time and fuel due to having to go back to the area
- Only connection option to stand outside on the veranda. If I move or turn my head the connection lost
- Service adversely impacted by extreme heat and windy weather
- WIFI connection regularly fails during internet banking sessions leading to further anxiety re security
- Berriwillock
- Service quality has deteriorated since December 2013
- Mobile connectivity critical to conducting business, particularly grain trading. Timely response regarding contracts is vital. Email and messages critically delayed
- Recent investment into the community of \$1 million dollars for CFA fire shed and Community Centre. No mobile connectivity possible in the facility.
- Satellite connectivity remains critically slow
- Glenloth & Charlton East
- Only intermittent service
- None in the house
- Wireless internet is the only option in this area. In a recent interaction with a Telstra Technician. In the course of an hour, the technician only had remote connection to the computer for 10 minutes

- Recent fire outbreak (Thursday Feb 6th), connection to 000 dropped out continuously throughout the call
- Smart phones are required by most businesses but are providing poorer service than older phones
- Fire on the 15th January, fire crews could not direct neighbouring brigades due to continuous drop out
- No available ADSL2 outside rural urban areas service due to low customer numbers
- Nandaly
- Reasonable to good connectivity at the house due to relatively close tower on the Calder SE of Nandaly
- 4-5 Ks west of the town the service deteriorates
- Good coverage north to Pier Milan
- Notable deterioration of service south through the middle of the Shire

Laen

- Service good apart from the south west corner
- Due to the Donald tower service OK to the east toward Donald
- Some good Optus service due to closer tower in the Wimmera
- Massey to Watchem area very poor

Watchem

- Optus tower secured by the community has greatly improved the Optus based service
- Black spot remains between Watchem and Warraknabeal
- Telstra wireless internet no good. Good phone selection is important. "blue tick" not a useful guide
- Telstra's Blue tick is about all that's available to indicate a phones receptive capabilities and this is not always reliable
- Optus service good due to the tower in Watchem, extremely poor Telstra service which drops out all the time
- Have experienced a 36 hour lag time for messages, which then all arrive at once.
- Heavy drain on phone battery due to ongoing search for service.
- Older phone works better than the newer ones.
- Charlton
- As an employer with four employees travelling across three rural shires including Buloke on a daily basis, it is of particular concern that there are quite a few areas of poor reception in which they are not able to use their phones.
- Given our current climate challenges and the general ability to enhance productivity with communications as well as ensure their safety, the North Central LLEN would like to support any submission made to the Federal Department of Communications that leads to improved mobile service provision.
- 1650 cars per day used the Calder highway in 2012 with 20% being heavy and commercial vehicles. This traffic is expected to grow at the rate of 5.3% per annum, making the black spots along this highway a significant motoring hazard.
- Stock and Station/ Real Estate Agents
- Critical to customer service. Business lost due to missed calls.

- Black spots noted across the western flank of the LGA.
- “Blue Tooth” and “Broom Stick” aerial helps, but can be expensive to set up and is a significant business cost.
- Heat and wind have an impact on service.
- Buloke Shire council
- Council operations rely significantly on effective mobile connectivity.
- There are dead spots in the Shire which means our staff are often uncontactable, this has potentially serious OH&S implications.
- Council manages a 5,000 Kilometre “Local” road network in an area of 8,000 square kilometres; there continue to be significant challenges associated with mobile connectivity.
- Increasing dependence on mobile internet connectivity presents communication problems.
- Community engagement and the provision of timely information to rural residents is adversely impacted by the mobile connectivity issues evident in Buloke. This impact on the delivery of Economic and Community Development projects and programs. The delivery of key Community Service programs such as Aged Care and Youth also suffer.
- In an area where all of the key family support services are outreached from some 100 kilometres away reliable digital and mobile connectivity is critical.

Birchip Cropping Group

BCG conducts crop trials and ongoing farmer engagement. A phone call and internal email poll quickly elicited the following list of 14 ‘Black Spot’ locations within the Buloke shire:

- Gil Gil.
- Watchupga.
- Berriwillock.
- Sea Lake-Birchip Road from Marlbed to the junction with the Sea Lake Hopetoun Road.
- Dennehys Road.
- North and east of Sea Lake to swan hill, Waitchie-Chinkapook.
- Half way between Birchip and Warracknabeal.
- Also between Dumosa and Quambatook.
- Out Corack road heading South on way to Donald and the back way to Charlton to Birchip (Baneynong /Jeffcott road).
- Between Birchip Berriwillock Rd and Birchip Sea-lake road and between Culgoa and Watchupga.
- Between Wycheproof and Boort.
- Sea Lake-Swan Hill Road, about 15km out of Sea Lake most of the way to Swan Hill.
- Same for the Culgoa-Ultima Road.
- The area around the Watchupga

Map Showing Mobile Phone Coverage in the Buloke Shire

Set out below are some Telstra service maps below to show how many black spots there are in the region.

figure 1 phone coverage (hand held)

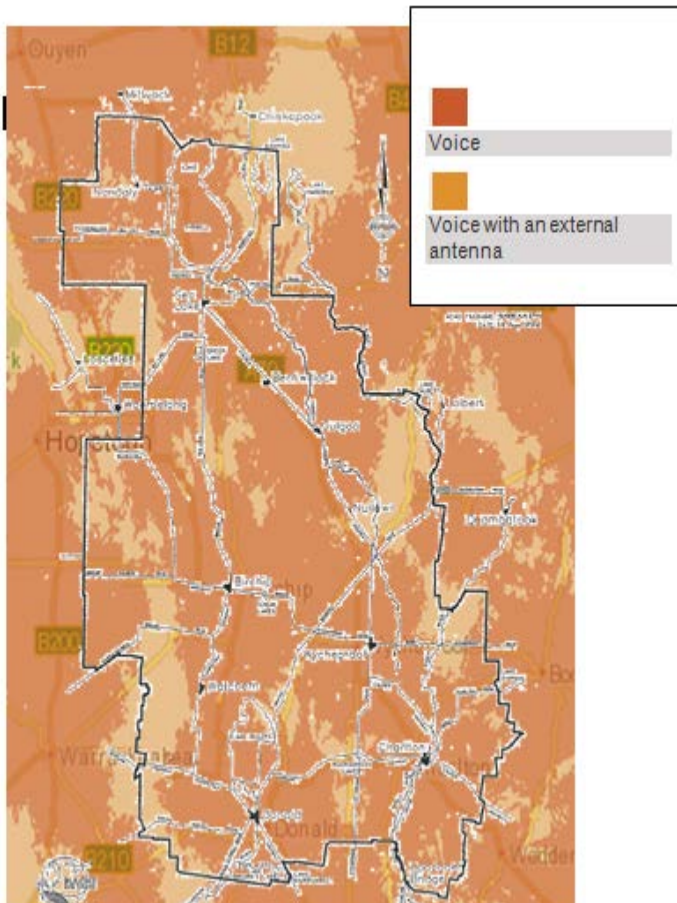


figure 2 data coverage

