

Submission to Regional Telecommunications Review Secretariat

██████████ Sandigo NSW

Thank you for the opportunity to attend the RTIRC Face to Face meeting in Wagga Wagga, it was very informative.

Please find below my submission regarding Regional Telecommunications, specifically focused on the Sky Muster Satellite Internet Service, and Mobile telephone service.

Due to the incredibly rapid pace technology is changing and being utilised in our society, I have grave concerns about the creation of a new “telecommunications class system” within Australia, that will have massively negative impacts for anyone outside of developed urban areas, including negatively affecting development, innovation and also making it less desirable to live in rural areas.

When Plain Old Telephone service infrastructure was rolled out over decades last century, it gradually evolved and changed to the point where basically ALL AUSTRALIANS, no matter where you lived (with the exception of truly incredibly remote and isolated properties), had access to exactly the same telephone services, and paid the same base cost. This was the case right up into the early 2000's, people are used to having the same access to services across the board.

However with the evolution of the internet requirements, we have seen a massive Digital Divide emerge, and due the incredibly swift changes in access and upgrades in computer/internet usage (ie streaming of basic services such as Television, online business usage etc), and mobile phone technology, we now are seeing the effects of the failure of the infrastructure in rural and regional areas to keep pace. And this is Digital Divide is incredibly worrying.

IMPROVEMENTS TO SKY MUSTER SATELLITE SERVICE:

There is a current issue with the way the NBN has been structured, and that the Sky Muster Satellite is seen as a third rate service, that is comparatively very expensive compared to alternatives such as Fixed Wireless or Fibre, with severe limitations on the amount of data that is available.

When the Sky Muster program was rolled out, it seemed to have been done with very little consideration for the fact that most of the connections would be in rural areas, primarily on Farming properties where not only are residents trying to run modern primary production enterprises, but also in many cases educate their children (and themselves), possibly with one of the parents also trying to complete off-farm paid employment, and access internet for personal use – all whilst using the one internet limited connection! The system was not set up with the agility to cope with this number of functions, and it is incredibly frustrating to try and utilise this limited system.

This is to the point were we personally don't yet have Sky Muster connected to our premises, as I can currently access (due to bundling provisions) 260GB of data via our Telstra 4G and Bundled Mobile Phone plans, which gives us a good amount of data to use AT ANY TIME, without restriction (albeit expensive as satellite, and not as fast as I would like). But the fact we have that amount of data to use as needed is currently outweighing those negatives.

However, I feel with some improvements, Sky Muster could become a much more agile and up-to-standard service, that really would come much closer to giving equity to those within the Sky Muster footprint. And I would be keen to take up Sky Muster technology if these changes were implemented.

- **CHANGE THE ROLLING FOUR WEEK USAGE (FAIR USE POLICY)**
 - No one can argue the need for a Fair Use policy with regard to Sky Muster (and in hindsight, a generous FUP perhaps should also have been applied to Fixed Wireless). However, the current rolling Four Week usage provisions within the Sky Muster FUP is not at all fair in comparison to other modes of NBN, and is an impost on those trying to work within it, where people are having to become the “data Nazi” within their household - and it is absolutely not fair, creating friction and tension over the issue of trying to comply with the FUP, where instead it should be a simple system to comply with.
 - **RECOMMENDATION:** Remove the rolling 4wk period, and bring in a SET four week period, which is an industry/community standard for services such as mobile phone plans.

- **REMOVE PEAK/OFF PEAK USAGE (FAIR USE POLICY)**
 - It’s insulting that only Sky Muster users are giving the indignity of having to deal with completely archaic, restrictive and unfriendly Off Peak hours of 1am to 7am. In this day and age, no business owner or student should need to be up working at those times to try and utilise data they are paying for.
 - **RECOMMENDATION:** Change the Off-Peak to commence at 9pm, or better yet, remove the off peak all together, and give people access to their entire allocation at any time.

- **INCREASE DATA ALLOWANCES TO BE THE IN LINE WITH AVERAGE NBN OVERALL DATA USAGE**
 - Currently the average data usage over the entire NBN is 190GB, up from 160GB in 2017. The most cost-friendly allowance amount for Sky Muster however is a comparatively paltry 70GB (for which Sky Muster users pay a significant amount).
 - **RECOMMENDATION:** That the Sky Muster basic data allowances is changed to be in line annually with the AVERAGE NBN data usage, and for the same cost as the 70GB current plans.

- **EDUCATIONAL DATA PACKS**
 - Educational Data ports at this time are only made available to those who are deemed to be in a limited definition of distance education. This is incredibly unfair to those who are relegated to the Sky Muster footprint, but not designated to be granted a distance education port. This lack of “Educational Data” is stifling the learning of students in the Sky Muster footprint, pushing them further behind those students who can access unlimited data. It’s galling to know that Sky Muster capacity is being utilised in planes for the entertainment for people flying around the country, but there is no similar allowance being given to those who are studying!
 - **RECOMMENDATION:** Education Data Packs are made available to ALL students in the Sky Muster footprint, as an addition to the basic premise Sky Muster plan. Multiple Data Packs can be applied for to cover each person in a residence who is studying in primary, secondary or tertiary (full time, part time or distance) education. The Data Packs should be at an incredibly discounted rate, and available for the 12 month period on proof of study being provided, along the lines of:
 - Primary – 10GB – \$5 p/m
 - Junior Secondary – 20gb \$10 p/m

- Senior Secondary – 50gb \$15 p/m
- Tertiary 1 – 70Gb \$25 p/m
- Tertiary 2 – 100GB \$50 p/m (for those studying at tertiary level who need extra data due to video conferencing and virtual classroom requirements).

- **MULTI CONNECTIONS TO A PREMISES**

- Sky Muster currently doesn't have the ability to enable a person to connect (and pay for) an extra service to the one premises. This severely limits rural residents who are trying to run businesses, whilst also needing the internet for personal use.
- **RECOMMENDATION:** Add the ability for a second or third service to be added to a single premises, to enable people to have say one service for business, and one for personal use (or for their non-farm paid employment etc).

- **PROVIDING FUNDING TO PRIVATE FIXED WIRELESS COMPANIES TO ADD FW INFRASTRUCTURE IN AREAS RELEGATED TO SKY MUSTER**

- There are a number of private companies willing to give rural residents an option of Fixed Wireless in communities that are in the Sky Muster footprint. However, the communities are not able to access any form of straight forward funding to do so. This is incredibly frustrating for those of us who are in the Sky Muster area, but are not by any means remote. In my personal example, I live 20km as the crow flies from my nearest town, and a private company could connect my community via a privately constructed FW network, however we cannot get guaranteed funding to enable this to happen.
- **RECOMMENDATION:** That guaranteed funding is made available to local councils to enable the building of infrastructure to create FW networks in the areas currently in the Sky Muster footprint.

- **PROVIDE FUNDING FOR THE CREATION OF A RURAL, REGIONAL AND REMOTE TELECOMMUNICATIONS INFORMATION, EDUCATION & ADVOCACY GROUP**

- A dire need exists for a publicly funded Rural and Regional Telecommunications Information, Education and Advocacy group, that residents in the Sky Muster and Fixed Wireless footprint can access for assistance with their NBN connections. Currently this service is only fulfilled by dedicated volunteer groups like BIRRR. Creating a funded advocacy group would mean that the hard work of the BIRRR group can be concentrated on working towards improvements in the rural and regional telecommunications space.
- **RECOMMENDATION:** A publicly funded Rural, Regional and Remote group is established to provide Information, Education and Advocacy for regional, rural and remote residents in the Sky Muster and Fixed Wireless internet areas.

MOBILE TELEPHONE SERVICES

Whilst services have improved, there are still a number of issues facing rural residents with regard to Mobile Telephone coverage and service.

- **KEEPING PACE WITH MOBILE ADVANCES IN RURAL AREAS**

- There is currently an unfortunate focus on advancing technology that helps “city” people get faster mobile internet service (ie 5G), whilst rural areas are still struggling along with 3g services, services that seem to be rapidly degrading.
- **RECOMMENDATION:** That there is development and investment in technology to give 4G as the baseline standard in rural areas, and that further funding is available to keep pace with future upgrades and advances in technology.

- **COMMUNITY CONSULTATION**
 - There seem to be an uncoordinated approach with a lack of community consultation when it comes to locations, and types/coverage, of new mobile towers. For example, the rural community of Grong Grong within Narrandera shire had a mobile tower constructed near the village itself, however the village has not been covered by the direct signal from this tower!
 - **RECOMMENDATION:** That in the future all mobile phone towers are constructed with consultation of the local shire council, and ability for community comment on requirements regarding the services that are needed.

- **CONSISTENT MINIMUM STANDARD COVERAGE**
 - There is a lack of consistent coverage on major highways and in smaller communities, and seemingly no consideration given to creating a minimum standard of signal strength.
 - **RECOMMENDATION:** That there is a coordinated approach to looking to give a 3bar minimum signal strength service to areas along major highways, and also to ensure smaller communities within shires have access to this service, especially those that have schools.

I hope this information can be considered. I am happy to be contacted for further comment/input, but do not give permission for my personal contact information to be included in any publicly available document.

Kind regards,

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