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SUBMISSION TO: AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENT REGIONAL TELECOMMUNICATIONS REVIEW

The Wheatbelt Business Network (WBN) in Western Australia, commenced in 2010 and is the region's largest business association supporting rural businesses, connecting them and growing the Wheatbelt. We have a unique understanding of the Wheatbelt due to our extensive network of small businesses from a range of industries across the region. We have over 350 members across all industries, across all 43 Local Governments of the Wheatbelt.

Businesses in the Wheatbelt town of Corrigin, two hours east of Perth, approached the WBN regarding the ongoing issues they face relating to the poor quality of telecommunication services they have access to (currently ADSL and satellite NBN). We are providing examples of their issues, which were experienced over the period of 3 months in 2018 and culminating in a number of days 'offline'.

Access to reliable and functional telecommunication services in rural communities is imperative.

Examples of issues provided below are not unique to Corrigin but are commonly experienced throughout the Wheatbelt and are on a weekly basis communicated to the WBN by our members across the entire region - who are predominantly on ADSL or satellite NBN.

People in the wheatbelt do not have equitable access to telecommunications services that are significant to people in those areas and currently available in one or more urban areas (<i>Terms of Reference 2</i>).
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Rural businesses are faced with a lack of equitable access to reliable and quality telecommunication services when compared to counterparts in urban areas.

Distance is the cause of many problems experienced by rural business owners and differentiates them from businesses operating in urban regions. Often businesses are being run from homes, which can be long distances to towns. Such business owners often complain of a lack of bandwidth and the negative impact this has on their ability to operate their business. To overcome this issue it is common for people to drive to the nearest town, or to another location (such as a hill on the farm) to connect to internet services. Another solution is connecting very late at night, or very early in the morning.

The removal of government service offices, and closure of many retail and business services, including banks, in rural areas, is necessitating the increased use of telecommunication services. Problems faced with connectivity and lack of speed and capacity is having a detrimental effect on business operations.

With continued globalisation and internet dependence, there is a very real fear that the internet may further separate country from city.

Wheatbelt Businesses **are not** maximising the economic benefits for regional communities through the use of digital technologies (*Terms of Reference 5*).

Telecommunications services are vital to participate in modern society. Many government, business and retail services are now provided online. People need to be able to access business, education, health, social and safety information and those experiencing issues face being left behind.

The standard of telecommunication services currently provided in rural areas are inferior and are not allowing many businesses to achieve their efficiencies or innovations. As a result businesses are not growing and communities are not deriving the benefits of thriving business.

On the consecutive days that businesses experienced issues with their telecommunications in Corrigin, businesses reported that they were negatively impacted (loss of sales, productivity of staff declined etc) by their inability to: access online accounting systems; use internet banking; access payroll information; use online booking systems; send and receive emails; place sales orders and; order stock. One or more of these processes usually underpin the success of each business.

In addition, insurance companies could not process renewals and claims. Medical and dental services could not access patient records and some specialised software packages. Transport companies were experiencing problems using GPS tracking, scheduling and time tracking software. Post Offices could not provide any identity services, redirections or parcel tracking. Training staff and volunteers often relies on online training modules. These could not be accessed and impacts on the ability to keep skilled and up to date with procedures.

In an attempt to overcome some of these problems people were using smart phones as mobile hotspots. However often they exceeded their data allowances, and some programs being accessed were not supported when using mobile data. Businesses were then charged for the extra data useage.

Additionally, mobile blackspots across the region see businesses who are mobile (from agricultural businesses to sales) having issues with connections between towers, downtime in making sales whilst being mobile and vast expenses in purchasing equipment for their vehicles to improve their signals whilst being mobile. This is certainly not equitable when compared to mobile metropolitan businesses.

Maximising digital technology

The poor connections and service being received by Wheatbelt businesses reflect on their ability to recognise or know what digital technologies they should consider or implement. Examples from our members include:

- Transport businesses who use GPS tracking and need the ICT skills to integrate it into their time sheets and billing, however feel that the current and even future reliability of telecommunications in their town and where their drivers operate will create more problems than solutions
- A general lack of understanding in the importance and role of cloud storage and in general back up of data

- A lack of understanding in regards to the types of digital communications and their relevance to various market groups
- Lack of skills in systems and processes, standardising and the automation of regular and repetitive tasks

The Federal Government should be adding value to rural businesses by;

- Noting the anticipated increase in demand for reliable telecommunications in the Wheatbelt
- Invest in improved mobile phone coverage in the Wheatbelt through additional towers, as an ongoing commitment regardless of political persuasions
- Investing in telecommunications infrastructure that is equitable and considers the gross domestic product generated rather than based on population
- Investment in telecommunications infrastructure because rural communities in the Wheatbelt will rely on it more, the further they are from urban areas and to reduce the challenges they face because they live and operate a business in the Wheatbelt
- Where NBN satellite is available only, co-investment in infrastructure such as that has been trialled in the NEWROC area by Crisp Wireless (www.newroc.com.au)

The benefits of reliable and functional telecommunication services in rural communities in the Wheatbelt cannot be underestimated. Telecommunications services are vital to participate in modern society and rural businesses need to remain viable so that rural communities can remain vibrant, compete at a local, national and international level and have the capacity to grow.

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