



Dear Sir/Madam

On behalf of the Gippsland Regional Executive Forum, an entity of the Champions of The Bush, I appreciate the opportunity to respond to the Department's Discussion Paper on the better delivery of universal services. As business owners in regional Victoria, our members understand the critical importance of reliable telephone and broadband connectivity for our business, ongoing regional investment and employment opportunities, and general community wellbeing.

Who are we? The Gippsland Regional Executive Forum (GREF) comprises 20 members with each member from a different industry sector. Members currently include businesses like- Dyers Distribution, Alan Wilson Insurance Brokers, Opal, Latrobe Regional Hospital, McMillans, RACV Solar, GBS Recruitment, Gippsland Water, Omnia Specialities Australia, Hydro Australia, AGL, Management Governance Australia, Latrobe Health Services and Littleton Hackford, Solicitors.

Connectivity Matters for regions : In our region, access to communication services and connectivity is critical for business and for regional locations to be competitive in terms of access to services and lifestyle – regional communities require, access to health and telehealth services, access to online education, and banking services and therefore improved and reliable communication infrastructure is critical. Our local businesses also rely on robust connectivity to remain competitive and thrive in an increasingly connected digital economy.

Supporting Fundamental USO Principles: GREF firmly believe in the fundamental principles that a universal service provides. Clearly there is a requirement to ensure that no one is left behind, regardless of their geographical location. As technology evolves, so must our policies and enabling regulations. The universal service obligation (USO) should continue to safeguard our community's access to effective and affordable fixed phone and broadband services.

Embracing Modernization: The landscape of telecommunications has transformed significantly in recent years. To ensure that Australians in regional and remote areas benefit from the latest technologies, we support the modernization of the USO. This includes moving away from legacy technologies like copper lines, which no longer meet our needs adequately.

Technology-Neutral Approach: GREF endorses change that allow service providers to deliver fixed and broadband services through the best available technologies. While maintaining certain safeguards, the regulation should be neutral on technology specifics. The obligation must be to facilitate what works best for our communities, whether it's fibre-optic networks, wireless solutions, or other technological innovations like Low-Earth orbit satellite.

Reliability and Resilience: Recent natural disasters have highlighted the importance of reliable communication during emergencies. The Gippsland community has experienced past disruptions in fixed voice and broadband connectivity, impacting safety, coordination, and access to critical information. Future obligations should prioritize reliability and resilience, ensuring continuity even in challenging circumstances.

In conclusion, GREF strongly urge policymakers to consider the unique needs of regional and remote Australia, and facilitate change which shape the future of universal service obligations and embrace technology which improves service provision, reach and reliability.

Unfortunately, the monthly meeting cycle of the Regional Executive Forum resulted in the lodgement of this submission after the March 1, 2024 deadline.

GREF seeks your favourable consideration of this submission.

Sincerely,

[Redacted signature]

[Redacted title]

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