

To: usb@infrastructure.gov.au

29th February 2024



Subject: Better delivery of universal services

At [OBE Organic](#), our story and our global reputation has been built on supplying some of the world's best clean and green organic beef, sourced from a pristine environment – the naturally irrigated floodplains of the Lake Eyre Basin's free-flowing rivers.

Australia has the largest organic agricultural area (53 million hectares) in the world, followed by India (4.7 million hectares) and Argentina (4.1 million hectares).¹

The Lake Eyre Basin is arguably the world's largest, and **most valuable region** for organic beef production in the world. Certified organic livestock are free to roam in an environment free from harsh chemicals or pollutants. Pastoralism continues to be the backbone of the local communities and beef and livestock exports are critical to Queensland's export economy, representing \$6.30 billion in export value in 2022-23.²

A modern universal service framework must deliver telecommunications services that are reliable, robust and able to meet the needs and expectations of consumers, and businesses like ours, that operate in regional and remote areas.

An opportunity to reframe our perspective on regional connectivity.

Whether you are in the business of organic beef or tourism, resources, disaster management or Local Government, the concept of regional connectivity should be broadened to consider the perspective of, or impact on, products and animals, as well as people.

We recommend the Review consider examining connectivity in the context of its impact on products, animals and people. A broader perspective will allow consideration of new or novel solutions.

Furthermore, we recommend the Review consider regional connectivity from the perspective of the movement of products, animals & people. It is a different way to think about connectivity. In this way, we focus less on 'the supply of fixed voice services and payphones to *people*', to a more holistic approach to regional telecommunications investments, which considers, why we need it, when we need it and where we need it.

About OBE Organic

OBE Organic® produces the world's best organic beef. We began in the 1990s as Australia's first and only premium meat exporter 100% dedicated to the production of organic beef. Our mission is to help people lead better, healthier lives.

Formed by a group of far-sighted pastoral families in Thargomindah, Queensland in the late 1990s, OBE Organic is still farmer-owned, with the privilege of supplying

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¹ [The World of organic agriculture STATISTICS & EMERGING TRENDS 2024](#)

² [Export and trade data | DataFarm \(daf.qld.gov.au\)](#)

consumers in Australia, as well as customers in export markets in Asia, the Middle East, and the North America.



OBE Organic sources its certified organic livestock from family farmers across the Lake Eyre Basin's Channel Country. Floodwaters naturally irrigate vast areas of the Channel Country and cattle feed on over 250 species of native grasses and forbs. Our cattle are sourced from one of the purest and most remote parts of Australia and it's why we have a strong interest in telecommunications services in regional and remote areas that are reliable.

OBE Organic has committed to the following:

- Encouraging State & Federal Governments to adopt policy supportive of our industry
- Contribute to the sharing of best practices across our industry
- Providing informed opinion to encourage constructive debate on industry matters
- Nurturing existing and developing new relationships with stakeholders
- Committing to capability development and training at all levels in our organisation
- Maintaining positive working relationships with relevant Peak Industry Bodies to influence policy positions.
- Participating in relevant trials of new technologies.



What should a modern universal service framework be able to deliver?

It is OBE Organic's position that improvements to the Universal Service Obligation (USO) which guarantees telecommunications services to regional and remote areas, should take into account the significant environmental, social, cultural and economic value of remote and regional Australia.

- Under current regulation, the Universal Service Obligation (USO) is a long-standing regulatory requirement on Telstra, as the statutory primary universal service provider, to supply fixed voice services and payphones to **people** nationally on reasonable request.
- Within this limited scope, the contribution of remote and regional Australia, to Australia's economy as whole, is not considered.

We are concerned that due to the relatively few **people** who reside in remote and regional Australia, the USO limits the opportunity for more modern and fit-for-purpose telecommunications services which could provide **phone services to people** AND a future-proofed network for phone and data services.



Our Business Considerations

Our [Sustainability Report](#) provides a snapshot of our efforts to deliver on our mission. The report shows that we take our commitment to people, animals, the environment and our product seriously. Whether you are responsible for moving cattle or people or goods or resources about the remote Outback, businesses have common needs.

Compliance: We need to comply with State and Federal Government Legislation like Chain of Responsibility (COR) as outlined within the Heavy Vehicle National Law (HVNL), Work Health & Safety Regulations (WHS Regulation), Animal Welfare Standards & Guidelines – Land Transport of Livestock and relevant codes of practise.

Traceability: The ability to trace livestock from property of birth to slaughter is critical for businesses like ours, which are compliant to the Export Control Act. We use technology like RFID tags to identify our animals.

Transparency: Internationally agreed upon frameworks like the Global Round Table for Sustainable Beef and the UN Sustainability Development Goals (SDGs), recognise transparency as key to meeting our social license to operate in years to come.

Future focus: In 2024 and beyond, improving supply chain resilience, growing and diversifying export markets, mitigating risk and harnessing opportunity will be key for OBE Organic.

Let's be clear. It's not all about organic beef.

Tourism is critically important to Australia's economy. Towns like Marree, Quilpie, Windorah and Boulia are not just gateways to the vast cattle production region of the Channel Country, they are tourist hubs as well.

The Big Red Bash, Simpson Desert Ultra Marathon, Birdsville Races, Boulia Camel Races, Channel Country Ladies Day, Bedouries Races & Rodeo, Betoota Races, Windorah Yabby Races and the Outback Golf Masters are just a handful of the events which bring tens of thousands of people instead of cattle into and out of our production region. There is a significant surge of people moving about and spending money in the tourist season, bringing benefit to regional communities.

The **Birdsville Big Red Bash** is a 3-day camping based music festival and is the largest event in Outback Queensland. It is billed as the most remote music festival in the world. The festival is supported by Tourism and Events Queensland, whose independent research indicated that it generated in excess of \$20m of tourism spending and economic benefits to the region in 2022, with similar figures expected for the 2023 event once that research is finalised.

The Birdsville Races

Way back in the Spring of 1882, a group of 150 owners, managers and stockmen came together on the South Australian and Queensland border for the first – and unofficial – Birdsville Races event. They managed to raise nearly 200 pounds by public subscription, enough to draw a significant crowd at the time.

What happened next reads like a movie script, and the first iteration of the Birdsville Race Club was born. The community gathered at Burt and Co.'s large iron store and the 'Border Jockey Club' was formed, being 42 members strong. Stewards were appointed,

a working committee elected, and the next race meeting was fixed for July, 1883. Now, well over 140 years later, the race continues to grow as an iconic Australian event – and something that is high on many people’s ‘bucket list’

The Birdsville Races has been a critical catalyst for infrastructure support and funding and it’s not a stretch to say that absent the Birdsville Races, we may have got mobile coverage in Birdsville, but we certainly wouldn’t have fibre optic that is designed to handle the load provided by large events.

The problem

Land lines fail in our region regularly. There is limited mobile-phone coverage, a patchy UHF network and unreliable satellite phone coverage in the pure heart of Australia.

When we depend on a terrestrial copper network, all parts of the network have to be available for the landlines to work. If there is a mains power outage on the network, the landlines will fail. If the outage is for an extended period of time, then the battery backups will fail as well. Millions of dollars are spent on batteries to power the network in the event of a mains power failure. Long distance copper networks utilise lots of control points, the hardware in these networks are old and spare parts are hard to come by.

When you don’t have the connectivity you need, operational decision-making is hindered, and lives can be lost, especially in summer when it’s hot and there are not many people about.

Safety

The National Road Safety Strategy 2021 – 2030 [Factsheet: Regional road safety | National Road Safety Strategy](#) reports that

- Fifty-five per cent of road crash deaths occur in regional^[1] areas of Australia.
- The rate of road crash deaths is 9.6 per 100,000 people in regional Australia, compared with 2.2 per 100,000 in major cities.

Case Study – A car accident, 2 kms on the Windorah side of the Cadelga turnoff

In June 2023, a livestock hauler, fully laden with certified organic livestock, came across a single vehicle rollover on the Windorah – Birdsville Road. Unable to get a signal on his sat phone or connect with anyone via UHF, he could not call emergency services. His only option was to sit with the injured driver next to the wreck of her car and wait. When another car came across the accident, he left her in their capable hands and jumped back in his truck heading towards Betoota.

Down the road a bit, travelling in the opposite direction, heading west towards Birdsville, was a local station manager. He flagged him down and ask him to turn around and travel as quickly as possible back to Betoota, to raise the alarm. He knew that he would get there quicker than a truck fully laden with livestock. The only way to call the Royal Flying Doctor Service was from a landline in Betoota.



Scenario – Royal Flying Doctor Service needs access to a remote airstrip in South Australia to render assistance to occupants injured in a vehicle rollover.

[Murnpeowie Station](#) is located 100kms north east of Lyndhurst on the Strzelecki Track. If there is a car accident on the Strzelecki Track, the Royal Flying Doctor service will call ahead to the Station to ask if they can land their aircraft and render first aid to the injured driver. When the Murnpeowie landlines are out, the call will go straight through to message bank. The pilot will assume that no-one is home and will not be able to land on the outback strip, limiting their ability to render first aid to the injured driver.

Future Opportunities with Better Regional Connectivity

- More efficient supply chains means an increase in Australia's export volumes
- Better performance reporting at a business, Local Government, State and Federal Government level.
- More and better use of CCTV for safety purposes.
- Better monitoring and compliance to manage biosecurity risks.
- Improved ability to selectively activate 'surge' capacity across digital infrastructure for major events or major disasters.
- The ability to move animals, products or people from one place to another with more and better compliance, safety and transparency.
- Increased security of income for contractors and service providers that are unable to operate without regional connectivity.

In Summary

We support the modernisation of the Universal Service Obligation. Reforming how universal services are delivered will help ensure Australians in regional and remote locations and businesses like OBE Organic, benefit from the newest and most appropriate technologies available.

We recommend the Review consider the data and information which flows between people in the Lake Eyre Basin. In 2024, it's time to consider more than just phone calls.

Current communication infrastructure, such as copper and other legacy networks are no longer adequate. How much better, safer and richer would our communities be if both voice calls and data were giving equal priority?

A future-proofed network for both phone and data services would allow businesses like ours to better manage safety, compliance, traceability, biosecurity & disaster risk management.

Agricultural supply chains like ours contribute millions of dollars to the nation's economy each year. Unfortunately, we have more real-time information coming to us from temperature trackers sitting in our boxed beef in warehouses in Los Angeles and Jakarta, than we do from our supply chain in Australia.

A modern universal service framework must deliver telecommunications services that are reliable, robust and able to meet the needs and expectations of consumers, and businesses like ours, that operate in regional and remote areas. We support USO changes that allow the provider to deliver fixed and data services through the best available technologies. **ENDS**