

1 March 2024

Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development
Communications and the Arts

By email: usb@infrastructure.gov.au



To whom it may concern,

RE: Submission the Discussion Paper: Better delivery of universal services

The Victorian Farmers Federation (VFF) welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Commonwealth's Discussion Paper on the better delivery of universal services.

The VFF believes all Australians must have accessible, reliable, cost-effective, resilient and quality connectivity outcomes. To achieve this, regulatory interventions and public investment are required in the absence of any market-led solutions. The rapidly and ever-changing nature of the regional connectivity environment necessitates ongoing review of contemporary policy, market and technology settings.

The importance of digital connectivity to farmers is immense and continues to expand. Good connectivity enables, but is not limited to the following outcomes:

- Access to real-time market information, including pricing trends, demand forecasts, and market analysis.
- Access to weather monitoring and forecasting services, which are crucial for planning agricultural activities such as planting, harvesting, and irrigation.
- Adoption of precision agriculture techniques, which involve using technology such as GPS, drones, and sensors to optimize resource use and increase productivity.
- Access to financial services such as online banking, insurance, and credit facilities, which are essential for managing farm finances, securing loans for investments, and mitigating financial risks.
- Networking and collaboration among farmers, researchers, suppliers, and other stakeholders in the agricultural sector.
- Access to e-learning platforms and online training resources, allowing farmers to acquire new skills, stay updated on industry trends, and comply with regulatory requirements.
- Adoption of sustainable farming practices by providing access to information, tools, and resources for environmental monitoring and conservation.
- Driving economic growth and rural development in regional Victoria by enabling farmers to participate in e-commerce, agri-tourism, and value-added food processing activities.

In addition to these specific outcomes for agricultural businesses, digital connectivity also delivers a range of social and emergency management outcomes that are vital for rural and regional communities.

It is critical that future universal service obligations continue to effectively safeguard Victorian agriculture's access to fixed phone and broadband services, which in turn deliver the outcomes noted above.

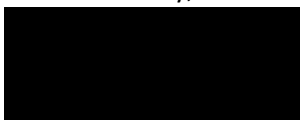
Nevertheless, it is important to recognise the level to which technology has evolved in recent years and understand the importance of government policy and regulation keeping pace with this change. It is important that regulations are focussed on delivering outcomes, rather than being fixated on the processes, technologies and actions used to try and deliver the outcomes.

We understand reforms will involve moving away from legacy technologies such as copper lines. These technologies are no longer necessarily the best option to meet agriculture's needs and continuing to use them risks holding our communities back.

The VFF supports changes to the USO to allow telecommunications providers to deliver fixed and broadband services through the best available technologies. Regulation should be technologically agnostic and not specify how outcomes are delivered. This can be delivered through guarantees around the detail of how services should be connected and maintained,

The VFF is concerned the current USO is static, with limited transparency and no framework for uplifting service levels or standards over the USO's lifecycle. Consideration should be given to how the USO may be made more adaptable to allowing for service levels and standards may be uplifted as the availability and demand for technology increases.

Yours sincerely,



Emma Germano

President

Victorian Farmers Federation