

REGIONAL TELECOMMUNICATIONS REVIEW - GOONDIWINDI REGION SUBMISSION

JULY 2024

INTRODUCTION

Goondiwindi Regional Council covers an area of 19,258 square kilometres in Queensland, along the state's border with New South Wales, and is home to approximately 11,000 people. Serving as the gateway to Queensland, 700 kilometres of federal and state highways criss-cross the region allowing for travel into all corners of the state and beyond. The region is potentially one of the most diverse rural production and value-adding areas in Australia. Agriculture is the main industry, contributing significantly to the gross regional product, valued at \$533 million. (ABS, 2021)

The newest industry in the region is renewable energy. While such technological advancement is taking place in the region, the irony is that connectivity is on the slide. Until a year ago, it would be true to say that the major centres of the Goondiwindi region enjoyed reliable telecommunications and digital connectivity, but the rural areas were the areas needing improvement. It was expected that the time since the 2021 review would have seen continual positive growth in connectivity in our region, and indeed rural Australia, but the sad reality is that many rural areas across the Goondiwindi region face larger issues when it comes to access, reliability, and speed – even in our bigger centres. Service levels appear to have reduced dramatically since the 2021 review, and especially so over the past year.

Telstra is the major provider of services in the Goondiwindi region, although other network carriers including Optus and Vodaphone do have a small presence.

With the knowledge that telecommunications are a constant cause for concern in our region, Council promoted to the region's residents the intention to make a submission to the Regional Telecommunications Review and invited residents to submit specific lived experiences with telecommunications in our region. The responses were consistent across the region.

The submissions outlined the lack of faith our residents have in the adequate and timely advancement of access and reliability of telecommunications, and in fact signalled very clearly that overall that residents felt helpless in dealing with the main provider, Telstra.

ISSUES WITH TELECOMMUNICATIONS ACROSS THE REGION

1. DECLINING CONNECTIVITY

Connectivity on our highways and roads has markedly decreased over the past year, an increasing obstacle for business and lifestyle. Similarly, residents in our towns have reported dramatically decreased service from the main supplier to our area, Telstra. While our agricultural areas have always had patchy service, there is great disappointment and frustration that the service is decreasing rather than improving.

In many cases, access to mobile data and broadband services relies on individuals making significant investments in infrastructure. People in our region, both in rural and urban areas, have spent substantial amounts on boosters for vehicles, homes, and offices. Some have even erected their own towers and created internal networks. This creates a disparity between those who can afford such infrastructure and those who cannot, particularly smaller farmers and individuals who are hindered by these costs. Access to connectivity should be available to everyone, regardless of their location in Australia. It is unacceptable that some businesses thrive while others fall behind simply due to their locality.

Network customers are driving sometimes large distances to localities closer to towers to access internet, and sometimes mobile network, simply just for day to day communications or business interactions. Residents are planning their days around the times when they expect internet access is not so congested – just to conduct business.

The lack of access to and the unreliability of telecommunications services is a significant source of frustration and a catalyst for mental health issues. Our residents frequently express their dissatisfaction with telecommunications limitations, which hinders their ability to live and operate businesses effectively in the twenty-first century. Similarly, communication in this day and age is effectively driven by technology and the lack of it, or unreliability of it, impacts on not only on business but also relationships. The constant lack of attention to it is becoming a catalyst for the isolation.

2. LIMITATIONS TO AGRICULTURAL PROGRESS

The Goondiwindi region is a hub of agricultural innovation in Australia, a country recognised as a global leader in agriculture. AgTech companies are rapidly developing and wanting to expand in our region.

Modern advancements in technology are transforming our region's agricultural landscape and enabling data-driven decision making, enhancing productivity and sustainability, and ensuring farmers are equipped to tackle challenges.

Locally developed sensors provide instant data on soil moisture and temperature, enabling early identification of problems and prompt corrective measures. Drones equipped with artificial intelligence can detect plant health issues and deliver fertilizers. A Goondiwindi company has developed an automated camera system that uses machine vision and artificial intelligence to detect cattle and monitor their condition. Farm robots perform precise tasks such as spraying herbicides and pesticides, thus minimising production cost and chemical usage. International machinery giants like John Deere test innovative technologies in the Goondiwindi region before introducing them to the global market.

Agricultural innovation is crucial, and by 2030, high-tech farming approaches are expected to add up to \$20 billion annually to farm production. (Australian Farm Institute, 2017) Adopting internet-enabled digital technologies could have a \$15.6 billion impact across the agricultural sector. (Digital Foundations for Agriculture Strategy, 2022) This would help the industry reach its \$100 billion goal by the end of the decade, up from the current \$71 billion. (Digital Foundations for Agriculture Strategy, 2022)

As financial technology solutions emerge in the agricultural sector, the need for effective connectivity is heightened. Mobile-based lending and payment platforms can ease access to credit and create efficiencies in payment processing. Digital platforms also give farmers the ability to broaden their markets and achieve better prices for their output. Meanwhile, access to real-time, accurate data helps predict weather patterns and increase crop yields.

However, many Goondiwindi farming businesses struggle to access the very technologies developed in their backyard. With connectivity not progressing at the same rate as technological improvements, the gap to reaching success widens, and the risk of losing profitable businesses in our local economy increases. The lack of effective mobile data hinders real-time remote connections, troubleshooting, and diagnostics of farm machinery, ultimately preventing the region from fully benefiting from these productivity advancements. Enhancing connectivity is crucial to harness the full potential of the next wave of AgTech innovation and ensure the region reaps its benefits.

Farm work can be inherently isolating, and this is worsened by the lack of telecommunications connectivity, such as mobile coverage or broadband services. Safety is a major concern for farming businesses, and in many areas, farmers are unable to rely on existing networks to access assistance.

Rural crime is an escalating issue and one that is often best tackled with technology. However, for people without reliable connection, it is not a practical option to utilise the solutions available through technology. In a world where technology is increasingly the answer to solutions, the lack of connectivity for practical solutions such as heat and motion on-farm cameras in our region is the reason for lack of advancement in many situations.

Similarly, technology is the key for traceability. Consumers are increasingly demanding product traceability for their food and fibre. Farm biosecurity is a very real threat to the viability of agriculture and QR codes for traceability and record keeping cannot be relied upon without connectivity.

3. DISASTER MANAGEMENT & EMERGENCIES

Our region is dissected by extensive highways that are often not adequately covered by existing services. This lack of coverage sometimes prevents accidents from being reported from the scene, and emergency services are unable to provide timely remote assistance. Consequently, this has led to poorer response times compared to areas with better connectivity.

Communication is the key to minimise the impact to people and property during times of natural disasters. Traditionally, the Local Disaster Management Group has issued emergency alerts during disasters, as recently as 2022 during the flooding in our region, as a means of communicating the need for residents to prepare to evacuate and then to evacuate. With an escalating number of residents turning to Starlink as their provider of choice due to its reliability, and in many cases using Wi-Fi calling, the risk of not being able to send alerts to residents is real.

It has been reported that residents in Beebo were unable to make or receive calls during the Beebo bushfires last year.

Residents in the Lulaguli district experienced a three week period without the mobile phone network or internet in early 2024. While 'intermittent' outages were forewarned the local policewoman had no mobile phone or police radio (police radio uses the internet signal) and as such she did not receive notification to attend a serious motor vehicle accident.

The Lulaguli outage coincided with a prolonged period of flooding in the west of the region. Our local fire brigade attended several flood rescues during this time and was unable to contact trucking companies and other resources to locate the incident. On one occasion they had to drive into the town of Talwood to use the Telstra free payphone to contact their communications centre to provide updates.

4. LABOUR SHORTAGES

Labour shortages are impacting our region. The inequity for connectivity access is inhibiting attraction and retention of staff in our region. Additionally, the Regional Australia Institute (2021) notes one of the barriers for a move to regional Australia is access to reliable broadband connectivity.

5. RECENT TELSTRA TOWER UPGRADES

The communication to customers in our communities about the upgrades and expected disruption has not been effective. Residents in the Goondiwindi locale started receiving text messages on or about 7 April 2004 notifying Telstra was upgrading its mobile network around Goondiwindi. These messages have become very regular occurrences, and receipt of the messages is causing increasing upset in the community.

The upgrades have been going on for months, however, with no clarifying communication, and extension messages have been sent frequently, with no clarity to the context. There has been a lack of adequate prior notice or suggestions on how to manage these interruptions. The 'interruptions' resulted in almost complete outage over one fortnight with a massive flow on effect to the local economy. The text communication has seen the community become less confident in the ability of Telstra to deliver due to its disjointed and seemingly ad hoc nature of messages.

While residents understand that for the upgrade of the service to 5G to occur there will be a certain amount of disruption to the service, there has been no understanding the disruption could go on for as long as it has. Effective communication is crucial during such periods, and unfortunately, the approach taken this time did not meet the standard of clarity and responsiveness that customers needed. Additionally, for some residents, the outages often have not aligned with the corresponding messages and in fact fall outside the informed messaged outage timeframe. Other Telstra customers have not always received the text messages, and sometimes days after others have received them. At the time of writing, there has been only 24 out of the past 84 days in which disruptions were not planned for the Goondiwindi tower, according to the 14 text message notifications.

People have been paying for a Telstra service throughout these continual disruptions and while some customers have been able to secure refunds, Council's request for a blanket reimbursement for customers across the affected tower districts has not been successful.

When these faults and declines in service are reported by customers to Telstra, customers are often left feeling helpless (despite paying for full service accounts) and frustrated with the apparent lack of understanding of our locales and the associated nuances with lack of attention to connectivity in our region. Some talk of 'being fobbed' or 'palmed' and basically helpless, all the while paying for a full service. Sadly, our region has become complacent to continuing decline in connectivity in our region and many customers are not reporting their issues because they feel there will be no understanding and no solution or outcome. Increasingly Telstra customers talk of slow, and sometimes non-existent internet coverage where they once had access to an increased service.

The recent upgrade works have severely damaged Telstra's reputation with what have until now been generally very loyal and supportive customers.

RECOMMENDED SOLUTIONS

1. The Government needs to ensure progress on **coverage of non-commercially viable mobile black spots** as priority in regional digital infrastructure program funding to ensure accessibility for all Australians.
2. We recommend the **Government be the lead in establishing where the towers are located** and allowing all service providers to access the infrastructure and move beyond co-funding models for infrastructure and, that the federal government lead the

direction of infrastructure projects and connect the checkerboard of mobile coverage across regional and remote Australia.

3. We recommend the government legislate to require **telecommunications operators to provide access for competitors to their mobile infrastructure in regional areas to enable roaming**. This is to support people and businesses in regional communities and improve safety for tourists in regional areas.
4. Connected to the Universal Service Guarantee, a **minimum repair time** should be established to ensure access to landlines and internet connectivity. This minimum repair time guarantee should extend to whatever method (Satellite, landline, microwave, wireless broadband) is the primary connection point for a community.
5. We recommend that priority be given to **forward planning for the use of 5G services in regional areas and the resultant impact of the Internet of Things (IoT) for regional communities**. Infrastructure needs to be designed to support long distance coverage for regional agriculture to enhance connectivity between farmers, livestock, and machinery to enhance modern farming and make best use of emergent technologies.
6. We recommend that the Government ensure that **service providers are held to account and guarantee that no person will be worse off under a move to the 4G network** and replacement of the 3G network fail.
7. We recommend the Australian Government pull out all stops to **ensure agricultural businesses understand their connectivity options and can access the infrastructure they need**, as referred to as 'Priority 5: Connectivity and Infrastructure' in the Digital Foundations for Agriculture Strategy 2022.