

23 April 2024



Regional Telecommunications Independent Review Committee
Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development,
Communications and the Arts
GPO Box 594
CANBERRA ACT 2601

Dear Sir/Madam

**SUBMISSION - INQUIRY INTO REGIONAL TELECOMMUNICATIONS IN
WESTERN AUSTRALIA.**

The following is provided for consideration by the review committee in relation to telecommunications within the Shire of Yilgarn area.

Background

The Shire of Yilgarn is located on the eastern fringe of the WA Wheatbelt and whilst agriculture is a prominent industry, mining also plays an integral part in the economy of the district. The Shire's area is 30,720sq km and has a population of approximately 1,200 people. The population does fluctuate depending upon mining activity, however there is also a significant number of Fly-In-Fly-Out and Drive-In-Drive-Out employees within the mining industry.

Comments for Consideration

Mobile Coverage

Mobile phone coverage is poor in the northern and southern areas of the Shire however, there has been improvement with the Australian Government's Mobile Blackspot Program in addressing some of these areas. The continuation of this program and construction of additional towers would certainly add to the coverage for isolated agricultural residents and mining operations/camps.

There remains a need for an on-going program such as the Mobile Black Spot Program, to improve mobile telephone coverage in areas where the commercial outcomes will not support this investment.

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While those living and traveling through regional, rural and remote Western Australia desire a choice of service providers, the current reality is that Telstra is the only service provider across large parts of Western Australia. The mobile Black Spot Program design responds to applications from carriers. However, there is a risk that the resultant investment does not deliver integrated service coverage across the region. Solutions that provide neutral host base stations that not only can but do support multi-carrier outcomes are likely to provide a more effective level of service.

The Mobile Black Spot Program continues to seek co-funding from Local Governments. This creates clear inequity, through an expectation that remote Local Governments, which demonstrably have the least financial capacity, are expected to co-fund telecommunications infrastructure that would be funded by industry in urban areas.

NBN/Internet

The introduction of NBN has been welcomed in the Southern Cross town site however, dependent upon a residence's location to the distributor node, internet access is extremely slow with residents stating that their access shows little improvement on the previous ADSL service.

Download/upload speeds within the Southern Cross NBN network are reported as being generally lower than the advertised/expected upload/download speeds of service providers.

The Shire of Yilgarn have contributed funding to CRISP wireless to assist with wireless internet connectivity within the farming region south of Southern Cross, as I am sure other local governments within the CRISP network have also provided funding. Funding telecommunications should not be a local government responsibility, nor should ratepayers bear the costs for upgrading poor telecommunications coverage, but it seems necessary for any kind of meaningful improvement.

Landline

In some southern areas of the Shire land line reliability is even circumspect. Reports have been received that residents in farming areas have considerable outages with their land lines which severely restricts communication by any means as mobile phone coverage is not available or intermittent. The issues are particularly prevalent in the South Yilgarn and Dulyalbin areas with the phone number prefixes of (08) [REDACTED] (08) [REDACTED] and (08) [REDACTED].

Local Submission

A Shire of Yilgarn Councillor provided the following based on advice from a resident around Noongar Road:

The black spots are terrible around his house, to the point he now has to go into a bedroom as it is basically the only area in the house you can access signal. Around his farm, same issues, and more black spots than coverage. He also mentioned that nearly every time there is rain, the landline goes out, and it takes a shocking amount of time to have fixed. His phone is still out, he thinks it is six weeks or more. He has given up chasing up a technician to come and fix the line, as it seems to be considered low priority. This person has a farming business, and relies heavily on phones for communication and access to other businesses, as well as to manage his marketing strategies. Having poor mobile phone coverage is detrimental to his business. One comment he made at the end was echoed by my husband. That at every upgrade there seems to be a further loss of coverage, whereas when we were CDMA, years and years ago, most farmers had good coverage around the area, unlike now. It is concerning that we are stopping 3G, when 5G has not improved coverage, but seems to have made it worse.

Emergency Volunteer Concerns

The local Bush Fire and Fire and Rescue volunteers often bemoan the lack of mobile coverage throughout the region, including sections along Great Eastern Highway. Whilst there is radio communication available, it is often difficult to communicate with those not within range.

2024 Power Outage – Communication Issues

The telecommunication outages during prolonged power outages in early 2024 show a significant lack of operational on-ground support and readiness. The economic, social and health impacts on Wheatbelt communities these outages caused has been well documented, and this must be considered as a high priority to address the telecommunication gaps during events such as this.

Proposed Actions

The Shire supports the Western Australian Local Government Associations comments in relation to regional telecommunications and supports their proposed actions, that the Australian Government:

1. Undertake an effective audit of mobile coverage as soon as possible, identifying the level of service that should be expected at each location.
2. Ensures that the extent of mobile service coverage does not diminish as a result of replacing existing 3G services with 4G and 5G.
3. Continues to co-invest with the telecommunications industry to increase mobile service coverage.
4. Refines Mobile Black Spot Program design to encourage solutions that provide effective coverage without needing multiple SIMS and mobile plans.
5. Requires telecommunications carriers to monitor and report the level of broadband and mobile service and adjust capacity to meet peak demand in areas that have significant changes in population throughout the year.
6. Identify mechanisms to encourage or require telecommunications carriers to identify the most vulnerable parts of the network to power failures and establish plans to greatly increase resilience against power failure.
7. Encourage development and deployment of cost-effective standalone power supply systems at telecommunications facilities including mobile base stations.
8. Evaluate the role of accessible satellite services to provide resilience for mobile and broadband services, particularly during emergencies.
9. Initiate the steps to achieve timely mobile roaming during times of emergency and potentially more broadly.
10. Redefine the Universal Service Obligations in terms of services provided, cost, reliability and resilience. The technology should not be specified, to enable options including satellite to be considered, provided the levels of service are guaranteed.

Whilst rural and remote residents understand the difficulties in providing services due to their isolation, they should be afforded standardised levels of communication comparative to those in metropolitan/urban areas.

Council appreciates the opportunity of raising the above matters for consideration by the Review Committee and looks forward to receiving positive outcomes following the Committee's deliberations.

Yours faithfully

