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3 June 2024

The Hon Alannah MacTiernan
Chair
Regional Telecommunications Review
Australian Government

Dear Ms MacTiernan

Regional Telecommunications Review – Submission

Thank you for the opportunity to participate and provide a submission into the Australian Government’s Regional Telecommunications Review.

South Gippsland Shire Council supports a review that will examine the adequacy of regional Australia’s telecommunications and hear from people in rural parts of Australia.

South Gippsland Context

South Gippsland Shire is part of Victoria’s Gippsland Region. The Shire has a population of 30,000 people which is projected to rise to 36,000 by 2036. Its major towns are Leongatha, Korumburra, Mirboo North and Foster. While our population is relatively small, our economy has national significance in regard to food production and manufacturing.

South Gippsland is best known for Wilsons Promontory National Park which along with other key attractions like the Great Southern Rail Trail, brings 1.2 million visitors to the area each year.

Recent impacts from February 2024 Storm in South Gippsland

South Gippsland has telecommunications challenges due to highly undulating topography, heavy vegetation and a large number of small and dispersed communities. As a result, many households have unreliable internet connections and sporadic mobile coverage.





The chaotic impact of telecommunications challenges was experienced first-hand in South Gippsland region on Tuesday 13 February 2024, when a devastating storm event occurred in our region. As a result of the storm, almost all townships in South Gippsland experienced a loss of mobile phone coverage, including Triple Zero (000) services.

In Leongatha, our primary commercial precinct and home to one of Australia's largest dairy manufacturing plants, it took approximately 32 hours for telecommunications to be restored. In Mirboo North, many residents were without access to 000 services for around seven days until adjacent communications towers came back online, providing intermittent coverage. This storm event was the second unprecedented storm event to impact South Gippsland in the past three years.

These experiences highlight the critical importance of reliable connectivity in an emergency, and strengthen the need for telecommunications to be recognised as an essential service.

Telecommunications providers must be required to meet service continuity standards to prevent significant, prolonged and widespread outages during natural disasters.

Our region needs the certainty of committed, ongoing, funding programs to build community capacity and connectivity.

Below are some points that respond to the Terms of Reference for this Review:

Telecommunications needs in regional Australia, gaps in services, and barriers to addressing needs, gaps and improvements in telecommunications outcomes

- South Gippsland's challenging topography and dispersed communities, results in unreliable internet for many households. This creates limitations for residents and students working from home which is a growing market in our region.
- Secure and stable telecommunications are also needed to support local businesses with essential services such as EFTPOS and point of sale systems.
- Connectivity issues on farmland and in villages are particularly limiting for South Gippsland's agriculture industry, which is trying to access new and innovative technologies.



Changes or adjustments need to be made to existing Government policies - and the design and delivery of programs - to ensure they continue to be effective; remain fit for purpose; are maximising the social and economic potential of regional Australia and of existing and emerging technologies; and deliver improved telecommunications outcomes

- Reliable connectivity is critical in an emergency, as recently experienced during the 13 February 2024 storm event that impacted South Gippsland communities with prolonged power and telecommunications outages.
- South Gippsland has now had two unprecedented storm events in three years that have resulted in virtually complete power and telecommunications loss. For some locations the loss was for an extended period.
- As a direct result of the storm event, South Gippsland Shire Council is advocating for the immediate reclassification of telecommunications to an essential service. Additionally, telecommunications providers must also be held responsible for the maintenance and delivery of infrastructure and services, and increase the back-up power systems for all existing and future phone towers to 72 hours in line with the state-wide emergency preparedness program, "The First 72 Hours".
- This is required to prevent significant, prolonged and widespread outages during natural disasters.

Policy settings that might be needed to support more rapid rollout of, and investment in, new and emerging telecommunications technologies in regional, rural and remote Australia, or to address emerging issues

- South Gippsland has welcomed State and Federal investment over recent years in NBN and mobile upgrades.
- However, currently 5G is not available anywhere in South Gippsland and the majority of our towns are still reliant on Fixed wireless technology. Our three largest towns are scheduled for upgrades to Fibre-to-the-Premises NBN but Foster, our fourth largest town and centre for a sub-region of our Shire, is not currently scheduled to receive this upgrade.
- Support policies to strengthen telecommunications during natural disasters including local arrangements and partnerships in remote and high-risk areas.
- Reclassify telecommunications as an essential service and implement urgent regulatory changes to ensure providers responsible for the maintenance and delivery of infrastructure and services, increase back up power systems to all existing and future phone towers from 18 to 72 hours



in line with the state-wide emergency preparedness program, "The First 72 Hours".

Constraints and capacity of the telecommunications providers to deliver investment and improved services to meet the needs of regional Australia

- We need the certainty and sustainability of committed, ongoing funding programs to build our communities capacity and connectivity.
- These programs can provide greater incentives to commercial telecommunications to establish or upgrade their network and services in regional areas, which would otherwise not be commercially viable or appealing, placing regional communities at risk and at a disadvantage.

The need for targeted place-based solutions, which may differ by region and remoteness.

- This is necessary as each region will differ. A targeted approach through close engagement with local government, industry and community will help to identify the gaps and priority areas requiring greater investment and support.
- Continue the Regional Connectivity Program and the Mobile Black Spot Program and explore innovative technology solutions and provide further funding opportunities for NBN STAND Skymuster sites and their ongoing costs.
- To review the Disaster Ready Fund criteria to streamline the application process to make it easier for local councils to apply to expand the project activity types and allow for gap identification and priority assessment projects. Restore the locally-led component of the former *Preparing Australian Communities Program*.
- There needs to be consideration of an ongoing program/s to address these issues and risks.

If you would like further information, please contact [REDACTED] Council's Manager Regional Partnerships on [REDACTED] or email [REDACTED]

Yours sincerely

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