

Regional Telecommunications Review Submission

I moved to my current location in Dairy Flat in Northern New South Wales, Border Ranges area, in September 2007. I live in the shadow of Mt Lindesay and about 3 kilometres from the Queensland border, as the crow flies.

When we viewed the property prior to submitting our offer the mobile service in Australia was CDMA. We had perfect mobile coverage anywhere on the four acres, in the whole area for that matter. The television coverage was very patchy at best and there was no internet access at all except via dial up, an extremely slow internet connection. We were just over 12 kilometres from the exchange in Woodenbong and therefore too far away to have access to ADSL internet. There was a landline telephone connection to the property

Internet

I applied for and was given the Government sponsored and funded satellite internet connection. I participated in the early trials for satellite NBN connection and then the subsequent upgrade to the Skymuster service. I did a speed test this morning (0835 hours on 18/08/2021) and the download speed was 24.8 Mbps and the upload speed 2.1 Mbps. I currently pay \$69.95 per month for my satellite service. This gives me 80 Gb during peak times and 150 Gb during off peak times. A year or two ago the NBN changed what was peak and off peak hours. The current hours are 0700 to 0100 for peak hours and 0100 – 0700 off peak hours. Prior to this change I think peak hours were 0700 – 2200. The reasoning behind this change in hours escapes me and appears nonsensical.

I am a pensioner, 74, and currently have my daughter and her family (including four school age children) living with us. This places additional strain on the internet usage and we consistently run out of data allowance. When this occurs the speed drops to 125Kbps so it is virtually impossible to use the internet at all. I have taken to getting up at 0600, or just after, to check my emails, Facebook and do any searching that I need to do to ensure I utilise as little as possible of the peak hour allowance. I, since my family moved in, have changed my plan twice to increase the data allowance we have. The problem is that the plans appear to keep changing and what a person has been paying for \$X for X Gb may mean they get less data on one of the new plans for the same \$X. The plan I am currently on has no equivalent in the new plan structure. With Covid-19 and the need from time to time to home school has placed a greater demand on the need for the internet. Unfortunately, because of the limited data allowance, my grandchildren have been unable to undertake some of the tasks that the school would like them to do. In the current lockdown the school has decided that my grandchildren should go to school and thereby do everything they are required to do utilising the school's internet.

During the lockdown last year the NBN provided an extra 40 Gb per month to help with the need for home schooling. This has not happened this time around. I am with Activ8 and during school holidays they provide an extra 5 Gb per week to cater for the children being home. This is very helpful as the children are able to catch up on anything they may be behind in with regard to online activities.

The satellite NBN has been very reliable except when there is heavy rain, such as in

thunderstorms, when the signal is severely disrupted. You lose your internet for the duration of the heavy rain which can be a few minutes or up to in excess of half an hour. We have lost internet several times because of issues Activ8 have had with mainly hardware.

Television and Radio

Within several months of moving in we basically lost television reception completely. I had a satellite connection installed and have had good reception ever since. We suffer the same fate as with the internet during periods of heavy rain.

When the satellite television setup was installed I utilised the old antenna to connect my radio to and we had radio, mainly FM, for about seven years. The roof of the house had to be replaced following storm damage in about 2014 and as a result the old television antenna had to be removed to facilitate the roof replacement. We lost out radio reception completely. I would have to erect a new antenna and run cabling to connect to the wireless to re-establish our radio reception. Not sure if the expense is justifiable.

Mobile Reception

Within about 12 months of moving into the property the Government, in its infinite wisdom, decided that a move should be made from CDMA to digital for the mobile network. This was done under the guise of increased security. This was a misnomer if ever there was one. Digital has shown to be no more secure than the old CDMA was. Hackings etc by media groups and other organisations, as has been publicly displayed, has drastically demonstrated this lack of security. Where we once had perfect reception we now have nothing. For a short period, several months, if you stood on the white line in the middle of the road in front of the house, held your mobile high in one hand and virtually stood on one foot you may have gotten reception. As it stands at present we have absolutely no reception at all. Our nearest reception is 8 kilometres to the west at the top of a hill at the intersection of Summerland Way and Mount Lindesay Highway. About a kilometre further west from this intersection on top of another hill is a mobile tower. We do not get anything from this tower because of the intervening hills. Travelling east you have to go 22 kilometres to the area of the Rukenvale State School to get reception.

When Malcolm Turnbull was Minister for Communications I wrote complaining about the problems experienced with landlines and mobiles. He assured me that we would have mobile reception within a few years. Five years or more later we are still waiting. I should have realised it was hog wash because it was a politician making the statement. The land line situation has not improved any either.

Telstra technicians, when they attend our house to address issues with the land line are unable to get mobile reception. If they need to report on the situation with the telephone they have to either travel to an area where they can get reception or use the landline.

Because there is no reception our electricity meter is read manually. We do not have a smart meter. Two electricity providers have found this out when they have sent people out to install a smart meter.

Because of the lack of mobile reception at my house I operate on a prepaid basis. It is pointless having a contract when the phone is only used, at the most, once a week when I go to a mobile

reception area. I have a Samsung 511 which is supposed to have a better aerial for poor reception areas. I purchased it from a Telstra store for this reason. It is about 10 years old. The phone is 3G and several months ago I received a message telling me that my phone was switching from 3G to 4G and that my plan would change. I was not asked if I wanted this to happen, I was told outright that it was happening. I rang Telstra and was informed that my telephone was 4G capable. She did not ask what type of phone I had nor how old it was. How could she make this statement without this information? I have learnt from the past that it is pointless to question these “customer service” people. It appears they are taught they are always correct and the customer knows nothing. The phone still shows 3G when I turn it on in a reception area. I would have thought that it should be showing 4G if I was now connected to the 4G network. I always knew that sometime down the track I would have to replace my mobile when 3G was no longer supported and was prepared to do that when the time arose.

I used to be able, prior to the change, to enter “*10#” and get a dollar balance on my account. Now what I get is a list of how many minutes talk time I have and other things but no dollar balance. Who decides this is the information I need rather than providing me with what I actually need?

When you sign up to a lot of businesses and web sites they require you to enter a telephone number. More often than not they insist that it be your mobile number. Most banks, as part of their online security, insist on sending you an SMS with a code for you to enter to proceed with the transaction or whatever you are trying to do. My credit union, now a bank, will send this code to you via the email address you have linked to your account as an alternative to an SMS. But my credit card is with a bank that insists on the SMS approach. The majority of banks do not offer the email approach.

With Covid-19 and the introduction and usage of QR codes to record attendance at shops, venues, etc a person needs a smart phone to comply with the requirements. Some places have paper facilities for those who do not have such a device whilst others the onus falls onto the staff of the business to enter your details into the system. No one gave any thought for those who do not have smart phones. These systems are devised by those who have grown up knowing nothing else. Perhaps we need to have some major power outages to demonstrate that such devices are not the be all and end all.

Emergency services all send out their warnings and notifications via mobile via an SMS. People like me and those without mobiles do not get these messages until several days later if at all, when it is probably way too late. So much reliance is placed on mobile communications these days. No consideration is made for those without a mobile or who have reception problems.

Landline

For us our main means of communication is via the land line. Over the past 14 years we have averaged about 7 outages a year. The initial problems were fairly regular and ongoing. It took about 7 years for that fault to be rectified. They found a line in Woodenbong, not far from the exchange, that none of the technicians were aware of that had a bad connection. Once this was fixed the outages dropped off but have, over the past few years returned.

Because of health issues we have Priority Assist (PA) with our account. With PA Telstra undertake to repair any fault within 24 hours. Telstra is the only provider that provides this service. Something I found out the hard way. Even with this we have been without a means of

telephonic communication for up to a month on several occasions over the last few years. The long outages have been when they require a replacement part and do not have a spare. They have to contact the manufacturer to get a new one as they, Telstra, do not carry spares of boards, etc.

If I was to have a heart attack or a stroke during one of these extended outages how do we contact emergency services for assistance? If a family member has an accident and requires an ambulance how do we contact them? We could go onto Facebook and try and get a friend to contact 000 for us but that is a long shot. The alternative is to drive 8 kilometres to a mobile reception area, or into Woodenbong and use the public telephone, and make the call but if the person is home by themselves how do they summon assistance?

If the line goes down I try to report the matter online. When I enter the preliminary details I get a message come up saying I have to ring Telstra to report the matter as I have PA. Why not have the system set up so that when someone completing the online form has PA it is immediately flagged with a supervisor of someone similar who can set the repair system in motion? Instead I have to drive 8 kilometres and call up to make the report or contact my daughter, if she is out and in a mobile reception area, to report the outage for me.

When you are talking to someone whilst reporting the landline out they do not appear to comprehend, understand or take notice of what you tell them. Before they will log a fault they insist that you agree to being charged a minimum call out fee of \$120 or more just in case the fault is found to be within the premises. This is even so when you have told them that there is only one outlet in the house and that is beside the front door where the line enters the house. If there are no other outlets in the house the problem has to be with Telstra equipment. They will not progress the fault complaint until you agree. Telstra is not alone in this approach. Other providers also insist on your agreement before progressing a fault complaint.

We often get offered a satellite telephone to tied us over until the repairs are completed. The thing is they tell you it will take up to three days for it to arrive and be installed. They send a technician out to install it but they also tell you a technician will be out the following day to address the fault. Generally what they send you is a glorified mobile with a fixed antenna. The antenna is attached to the gutter and the mobile is attached to the antenna at all times. We have had a technician come down from Ipswich, a western suburb of Brisbane, to set up a satellite telephone only to find he could not succeed and depart. A two hour trip one way. True satellite telephones require clear skies to operate. If there is any cloud coverage at all they will not operate. I know this from previous experience. Even when you tell the Telstra person that they do not work they insist on sending one out.