

2021 Regional Telecommunications Service Review

Submission from:

Stuart Wilson

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I live in Glen Valley which is small and remote community on the edge of East Gippsland of about 30 rateable dwellings and serviced by Victoria's first declared highway, the Omeo Highway, which runs through the town from Omeo for 110 kilometres to Mitta Mitta and beyond. Almost 100 kilometres of this road between Omeo and Mitta Mitta is without handheld mobile phone communication and there is only one emergency phone located on the southern side of Mt. Wills.

The Victorian government completed an upgrade on this road in 2014 with the sealing of the final section and immediately traffic increased. It is now a major northern access from East Gippsland and popular with motorcycle enthusiasts, pushbike riders and other travellers. Almost every weekend from Spring to Autumn it is estimated over 2000 motorcycles travel this road every weekend to enjoy the winding mountain road. In winter these dangerous corners are often covered with ice or snow making them even more treacherous. The state government allocated \$14 million dollars to this upgrade and it came in \$1 million under budget. Not one cent was allocated to improving communication on this road to deal with the increased volume of traffic and the associated problems. Providing better communication should be mandatory with developments of this nature and I have given warning to the State government on this matter for future developments such as the proposed Benambra-Corryong Road which, when sealed, will become another weekend death trap.

With the increased traffic came increased crashes and it did not take long for the road to develop a gruesome reputation with a large number of fatalities and serious crashes. When the Great Alpine Road is closed due to snow, travellers resort to the Omeo Highway which is also affected by snow but to a lesser degree. Travellers still get into trouble with no means of calling for help. Fallen trees, regular rock slides and collisions with animals are other problems experienced.

I have been petitioning for better communication in our area and the Omeo Highway for eight years, firstly with the then Communications Minister Malcolm Turnbull followed by a successful application to Round 1 of the Mobile Phone Blackspot program (MPBSP). Vodafone tendered and was granted funding for a macro cell at Glen Valley but it failed to deliver even after a suitable site was chosen and lease agreements signed. It was eventually released from its legal obligation to the government but not until we missed out on four other rounds of funding. The funding criteria then changed with communities or individuals required to lobby Telco providers as opposed to the government seeing a need and offering funding to build base stations. A large number of providers were lobbied to apply for grants under round 5A but none were interested. It was an economic decision and not one based on location or need. This lobbying process leaves small communities such as ours at a significant disadvantage.

This area is currently serviced with an aging copper network to an exchange which is then microwave connected to the telecommunications network. Recently a number of phones in the area were not working for more than a month and for some this is their only communication. It is a regular occurrence and there is no alternative. Telstra manages the copper network but its own systems mean faults are only repaired once reported so many faults on the same line (but different numbers) are often not detected because owners are away. This necessitates another visit from the technician or line worker to find and repair the fault. What takes a day in the city takes weeks here.

In the last communication I received from the minister it was suggested Wi-Fi calling could be used as an alternate means of communication. That assumes firstly people are connected to the NBN network but many are not. There are also more problems with this method of calling. Wi-Fi calling works well when

internet is fibre optic based but not with satellite NBN and that is the only option in remote areas. Satellite internet suffers from issues with latency which is a term describing Ping and Jitter. It would be better to have an expert explain what that means. When Ping and Jitter is slow, as is the case with satellite NBN, it will not work effectively. It also does not work on all networks or all devices which is another issue to overcome. Low altitude satellite technology resolves the issue of latency but it requires many satellites to maintain a constant connection. I have tested Wi-Fi calling at home and it works less than 10% of the time with the receiver not being able to hear anything I say most of the time.

Our area is surrounded by State forest and the Alpine National Park. It has been affected by bushfire in 2003, 2019 and 2020. The fire fighting teams were frustrated by having to find a service spot to receive and send specific information on their tablets. Bull dozers tore up underground phone lines and left many without any contact.

The area is also a popular location for adventure sports and recreational camping with hundreds of people visiting the area, mostly in the warmer months but many also in spring when river flow encourages white water sports. While being without a phone is appealing to many when they escape to the wilderness, communication has become a lifesaver for many and phone coverage will reduce rescue times which will save lives.

The difficulties faced with providing mobile phone communication to remote areas is not lost on us. Power supply and backhauling are the two major concerns but both these issues can be overcome with current technology.

I note the terms of reference for the enquiry with specific attention to number 2:

'In determining the adequacy of those services, the Committee must have regard to whether people in regional, rural and remote parts of Australia have equitable access to telecommunications services that are significant to people in those parts of Australia, and currently available in one or more parts of urban Australia.'

The important aspect of this is the equitable access of the type of communication that is significant to the people in these areas. When people do not have a reliable telephone line and are not connected to internet services, communication would be considered none existent apart from the twice weekly mail service. Internet services are not of any use should someone need to call for urgent assistance. People in towns take for granted the difficulties faced by those with poor communication and there is no redundancy here for when the landlines fail.

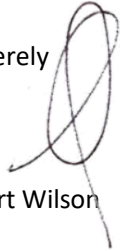
Another term of reference applicable is 5a:

'whether changes are warranted to existing Government policies and programs to ensure they continue to be effective, fit for purpose and are maximising the social and economic potential from existing and emerging technological advances;'

Governments should look to the need and fund that need for those sites that are difficult, less than desirable or uneconomic instead of relying on communities to lobby Telco providers. With regard to emerging technologies, while lobbying providers I spoke with a number of people who are working on new technologies including one who has patented low altitude satellites which could be a game changer for many remote areas and remove the need for leases, solar power and complicated backhaul. Towers on the ground have many limitations and are susceptible to natural disaster but also require significant power generation to function and are limited by line of sight. This concept could make towers redundant and the government would be wise to look to solutions like this now. Battery technology is changing rapidly but already there are new alternatives to the old style batteries used in standalone power setups and remote mobile phone towers. These batteries are enhanced with new solar power technology but still require fossil fuel backup generators for emergency power.

I will keep this brief and thank you for the time and consideration to investigate the problems associated with communication in remote and rural Australia. I do not feel our situation is dissimilar to the many remote communities suffering in the same way we are and hope they will benefit also through the recommendations of this committee. If you would like to discuss this further with me, I am more than will talk with you personally.

Sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'Stuart Wilson', written over the word 'Sincerely'.

Stuart Wilson