

Response to Regional Telecommunications review 2021

Geoff & Bronwyn McEntee



Context of our comments

We have moved to Glen Esk and in semi retirement. I still work part time. Given COVID that is now and almost exclusively online and by Teams / Skype meetings.

As such we have witnessed the exceptionally poor telecommunication provided to Regional and rural Australia.

We have lived overseas and know that even what we had at Kenmore was sub standard by comparison to other countries. NBN in particular is appalling failure. The mobile phone coverage is poor and lagging what is needed and should have been minimum standard in 2021 - full 4G all the time.

Currently in order to conduct part of my business - that which requires Teams / Skype meetings and open discussion of large files e.g. AutoCAD files - I have to drive to our house in Kenmore and use the NBN there. The satellite will not work for business. There is no real 4 G coverage regardless of what Telstra map says - its at best 3 G and often nothing. We are 2km Brisbane side of Esk township next to main highway. The main telecommunication cables pass along our street boundary. Yet our telecommunication is appalling. Why?

NBN was to be provided as fibre. I have copies of the original plans for Chaille Rd. Then NBN changed that without ANY consultation to satellite. They did this as they could not manage the project properly, got well behind and needed quick catch up so they just dumped people onto satellite so their statistics looked good and they all got bonuses instead of being sacked. Read the Federal Govt. committee report into NBN and they are scathing about this. Yet NBN and Govt. has done nothing to address this overuse of satellite. So you can see that your review is considered as disingenuous. You know what the issues are and have ignored them multiple times previously.

Comments on the execution of the review

What is the planned review process and what is the planned outputs? Who is the audience?

What approvals are needed in order for the review to be actioned? All these should have been outlined in the issued document.

Please immediately reissue that document with all the necessary information instead of just very selective information you have issued. Refer my point above about being disingenuous.

Where is the comparison of the previous review to the current status? This is a key factor. Did you actually do what was needed according to previous report and if not where and why did action not occur? Outline this in the revised document.

Its not a trivial matter. If you do reviews and come up with actions you must compare now to what you previously said would happen. Lets see how committed the committee and the Govt. is to doing things to rid us of the third world telecommunications we currently have.

These committees are not just creating jobs on committees.

Suggested improvements for next review

Advertising. It is dumbfounding that there has been such a low level / almost negligible advertising of this review.

We only found out about it through a small comment in our local newspaper suggesting people put forward their views. This was from a farmers collective NOT from this committee nor from Govt.

It is clear that the committee and Govt. wants to do a review without real input from the regional and rural population. Shades of "Yes Minister".

There is no point in doing these reviews unless you solicit wide and deep views. Your actions to date have been far from that. Refer my point about being disingenuous.

Future reviews: all regional and rural households are to be mailed. There is to be a Govt. paid for TV and online advertising - you need to actively solicit input.

Visioning - the future and what will be needed

You seek views on telecommunication and ask questions such as how effective are the current and presumably recent policies.

You do not define what these policies are. We know the current policies as executed largely ignore regional and rural Australia needs except when there is a special political motive for an area. What are the current written policies for telecommunications for regional and rural Australia? Outline them in the revised document.

Surely the future can be more than one possibility. Do we know what will happen and hence how our regional and rural areas will need to adapt? So you need scenarios.

There needs to be visioning of what the future might be and what telecommunication are needs for each scenario. Perhaps many of the visioning scenarios will result in similar telecommunication needs - but you will never know unless you have explored this. So why is this not part of this review?

Time scale of actions to address the current third world telecommunications

This review is based on what time frame into the horizon? It infers the future. Next week? Next year? 2 years? 5 years? 10 years?

Its a sad point that the review has not defined what time scale(s)

Clearly there is an urgent need to address the third world telecommunication in regional and rural Australia. That needs to happen in under 2 years. Yes 2 years.

If you are thinking it cannot be done - that is why it will not be as you re not committed to "make it happen".

In 5 years regional and rural Australia will need to be much more agile and competitive and this drives greater telecommunication capacity across all areas. 1GB upload for NBN and 5 G across all areas is a minimum. No satellite expect for very remote areas such as deserts.

Bipartisan support

We see this review as highly likely to be window dressing so that Govt. can say you are consulting.

Reading the issued document leaves us with the view that the aim of this is not about improving the current situation its about maintaining the current third world telecommunications for regional and rural areas.

If the review was truly focused on solutions where is the bilateral support at Federal level? Where is the State support? Clearly not evident in the issued documents.

This then leads to conclude this review is window dressing at best.

Private or public infrastructure

A key failure by Govt. has been the sale of the backbone fixed line system to Telstra. This backbone is a monopoly and it was sold to Telstra for much less than replacement cost. Selling off this backbone means you have placed the development of fixed line into a company who has no interest other than to make money as easy as possible. There is no incentive to expand the service whatsoever. Indeed the economics dictate that the network be scaled back to minimise maintenance and operating expenditures.

Telecommunication in regional and rural Australia may not be big money spinners for a company. However telecommunication is essential for regional and rural Australia for these areas to be the main drivers for the Australian economy. Simply put the value that the regional and rural areas of Australia contribute to GDP dwarfs the small loss on providing the right level of telecommunication in regional and rural Australia. By limiting the telecommunications you are actually limiting the value regional and rural Australia can contribute and their ability to become even more competitive and carry the Australian economy. This is why having companies (phone or privatised NBN) is such a bad result for Australia - you limit the value these areas can contribute to the big economy. The networks need to be Govt. same a roads are.

The reason some infrastructure is in Govt. hands is that only a Govt. monopoly can and should hold these assets. This is the case for fixed line.

Where are the drivers for mobile operators to provide full coverage? There is none. They will focus on what makes them money easiest with least investment.

Neither of these align with the need for Australia to invest in telecommunication to support non major city based populations and businesses. As pointed out above the great proportion of GDP is generated by regional and rural Australia so why is there a lack of telecommunication investment with will enable these areas to further improve efficiency and increase wealth / competitiveness?

These are questions the committee and both parties need to answer.

Comments to the questions posed in the review

Many of the questions seem aimed to get an answer to a very specific question - presumably the committee has its report drafted and just wants input for only the 16 points. Seems there are already predetermined outcomes and you do not want a broad set of issues just a very narrow set.

Why?

The committees questions are not deep enough nor do that consider the value of regional and rural Australia to the Australasian economy.

Why?

For example a question could have been: how does regional and rural Australia see the future needs of telecommunication in regard to improving your business and local society? What technologies do you think will be used in 2, 5 and 10 years time that need greater telecommunication power, what do you think would be needed and what will happen if the telecommunication third world system we have not are not uprated to 4G minimum across Australia and 1GB broadband?

Responses to questions posed in the review

1. Question posed is not a singular question. There are multiple questions within the question

- Before the questions can be address the real question is “does Australia value regional Australia and if so why is regional Australia provided with third world quality telecoms”? Currently there are selected cities / towns that for “political” reasons have good telecommunications e.g. Toowoomba. However the nearby LGA of Somerset has third world telecoms. Why?

Clearly there is a disparity between regional areas. Why? It is good to have this review but the bottom line is that the review is useless as it compares some regional areas with good telecoms and some with third world telecoms.

So the question to the committee is how are you going to a) differentiate areas b) assess the significant disparity between regional areas.

Without this basis this study is meaningless. That assessment criteria should have been documented in the terms of reference. Its not. Please incorporate this into the reissued document. This is so we know you will not be comparing apples and oranges and end up with a fruit salad which will lack any form of drivers to bring all of regional Australia up to equal standard.

- The question asks about the future needs. So before that can be answered the committee needs to answer the question what value does Australia place on regional and rural Australia. Secondly what is the time frame / horizon. Lack of this makes committing very difficult. What I would see as an horizon may not be what the committee is looking at.
- Looking at regional Australia outside just our local area and the proportion of GDP and wealth that is generated in regional areas it is very clear that regional Australia carries the rest of Australia. Coal, Gold, bauxite, cattle, wheat, sorghum and other crops all add a very significant value to the Australian economy. Yet in regard to infrastructure including telecoms the Govt. investment is significantly less by large %. Why?

It appears that Australia and the politicians want the income and wealth regional Australia creates but then will not invest in infrastructure to support regional Australia

- Regional Australia needs the following telecommunications NOW
 - 4G along all highways and major roads and townships and for a distance of 50km from these trunk routes as a minimum. Ideally telecoms needs full coverage wherever people work and live. National Parks are no essential but for safety reasons

- 4G should be considered as a medium priority by 2025.
- NBN. Satellite is useless unless you just want a few emails and are happy with stalling web browsing. The latency caused by the satellite technology makes satellite useless for business. You know this. NBN knows this. The telecommunications ombudsman knows this.

There is a Govt. committee that reviewed the NBN and said satellite was inappropriate and was to be used only as a last resort. It mandated that NBN stop providing satellite as an easy quick solution to get its roll out numbers up and NBN was to provide fixed wireless or preferably fibre.

The committee would know this already.

So the question to the committee is why has Govt. allowed NBN to ignore its mandate and the committee and continue to provide satellite?

Glen Esk is about 100km from Brisbane and hardly outback / remote. So why are we on satellite?

I cannot operate my business from Glen Esk. I have to drive back to our house in Kenmore to conduct the meetings.

The COVID restrictions have placed added burden on use of telecommunication and satellite has failed as a technology to support business.

- Copper cable home lines. Not needed. Copper corrodes over time and should never have been seen as a permanent solution for telecommunication anyway.

NBN basically mandated that we lose our copper phone when they provided NBN. Copper can be used as a back up perhaps.

- Other businesses. You only have to go to the local businesses in Esk and see the impact of the poor telecommunication. Staff walk around the shop with the payment devices seeking a sufficiently strong signal. Often sales are voided due to time out.

2. For regional and rural areas to become more efficient and create even greater value to the Australian economy they need to leverage world class information systems.

If you look at agriculture for instance you will see the start of drone use to target spray areas of crops. There are many other efficiency improvements but most of them require computing power and as such robust and rapid telecommunications.

Without these improvements Australian farming will suffer compared with other countries and as such the value provided by regional and rural Australia will diminish. So the bottom line is all regional and rural areas require strong fast robust telecommunication at a reasonable cost.

3. What polices? Am sorry to say this question created laughter. Send them to me - publish them. Exactly what are you referring to? The NBN has been an unmitigated disaster. It was promised that regional areas would have fibre. Instead we get "satellite" which is OK for low level consumer interface at best but not good enough for business.

Does Australia want population growth in regional areas or is the policy for everybody to move to the cities on the coast? If you want regional growth then you need to provide the

services that cities have for regional areas. Why would someone choose to move to regional areas and suffer such third world telecommunication? Simply put they will not.

Improvements: do NOT sell off NBN. Make NBN a Govt. Dept as its a MONOPOLY. Mandate that NBN has less than 2% of customers on satellite by 2024. Force the mobile phone operators to provide at least 4G coverage as outlined above. Where the phone companies cannot / will not NBN should provide the 4G towers and the phone companies have to lease the use of these. All phone companies must cover all areas or lose their operating license. Telecoms is not a nice to have in a developed economy it is an essential one. The key issue is that the network should NEVER have been sold off the Telstra. The network is a monopoly much like power transmission systems.

4. How can this question be answered by any persons? You are asking a broad area question.

From our perspective reliability needs to be same as for electrical power. For natural disasters and emergencies in regional and rural Australia we very much need to have access to phone - mobile coverage. This is one of the reasons the current poor coverage is not acceptable. Currently when it rains we lose satellite. When there is a storm we lose satellite. Its rubbish.

5. Why are you so focused on reliability? What is the gap in reliability now? What we need is as above - same as power reliability but we need full area coverage not the limited and patchy arrangement that exists. You are focusing on the wrong area - its not reliability it is coverage and technology that are important- 4G and 95% fibre NBN as min.

6. Example. Banks have all disappeared from regional and rural areas except for larger cities like Toowoomba. So we have to bank on line. That's a major issue as the satellite latency is not compatible with banks security protocols and often results in failures. Again satellite is not an appropriate technology for NBN.

7. Look at the value regional and rural areas generate to GDP and then re ask yourselves your question. The question is why regional and rural areas are not provided with world best telecommunication as they are the key drivers for the Australian economy. You should be fully supporting best that can be provided to regional and rural areas based on their contribution to GDP, particularly export related income.

8. See above. Simply put if you do not fix the third world telecommunication our regional and rural businesses will be increasingly less competitive and as a result they will deliver less to the Australian GDP.

9. Define " innovation". Your question is far from clear. What we need is good strong telecommunications backbone. NBN - fibre or fixed wireless min and 4 G min mobile coverage with 5G within 5 to 8 years. Let business determine their our innovation using the backbone of the telecommunication systems available. Govt. attempts to innovate are lamentable. Show me examples which you have been successful.

10. See point above about visioning. Its crystal ball stuff. What regional and rural businesses need they can do themselves but they need the backbone of strong NBN (no satellite) and minimum 4G. Now.

11. This question is rhetorical. You had the opportunity get NBN right and failed. Get it right that's what you need to do. Do NOT sell it off. Provide 4G network towers right across Australia as above ie 50 km coverage from roads and towns as a minimum. This should be part of NBN which in reality is more than just broadband it needs to provide mobile phone net-

work (but not be a domestic seller only trunk provider).

12. Not going to even comment on this.

13. What investment programmes are you referring to? You ask a question but how do we know what you are referring to as you have not outlined them. If you mean NBN - its an abject failure in that it needs to be 95% fibre 4% fixed wireless and less than 1% satellite by area not users.

14. I do not understand the context of this question. This is specifically one where you seem to have a predetermined end result as its an unclear question.

15. We need NBN to provide fibre capacity as above and 4G moving to 5 G. People will find out and use it if its available. Your role is to make it available.

16. See above.