

Submission from Neil and Janette Jones

It should be noted that my wife, Janette, and I live in a rural area some 45 minutes drive from Port Macquarie. We do not, repeat, do not receive mobile coverage here and rely on satellite internet and television services. The only telephone service is a landline service which is critical to ours and many others' access to health services and general communication with the world in both business and family needs. We have resided here for 41 years and are now retired in our late 60's. We love the home we constructed ourselves with our own hands and the 40 ha of beautiful country that we look after.

The following is an account of a series of failures by Telstra to provide a working phone service in Marlo Merrican during 2019, 2020 and the first half of 2021

Firstly it was the long outage in March/April that broke our confidence in Telstra.

Power failure: Friday 26th March at Marlo Merrican, including Neil and Janette Jones'

Phone Cut: within an hour of the power failure on Friday 26th March

Phone Restored: Wednesday 31st March phoning out was restored but incoming calls not working. This was reported to Telstra

Report Number: Telstra's response was that "There is an outage in the area and nothing can be done until 27th April.

On the 20th April incoming calls were still not possible to our phone and all other landline phones in the immediate area.

This is some fifty households.

Eight weeks later on the 18th May there was at least one phone unable to take incoming calls and two phones still not working. One of the latter is in an area without mobile phone coverage. This family of four has a father with health concerns and a mother working in town and two school age children.

Points to note and history:

1. Each time there is a natural disaster the landline breaks down. This occurred during the Fires of **November 2019** and again during the flood of **March 2021**. When the phone line is most needed it fails.
2. Our phone, a landline service and the only service we have at our home, went out on **1st December 2020**. After 4 weeks of no phone service, Telstra sent us a satellite phone via courier which we had to pick up from the Telegraph Point Service Station some 27 kms away. We were expected to install it and get it running ourselves despite notices that came with that a Telstra technician was required to install it. I had to climb onto the roof to affix the antenna. Naturally, it did not work. It was at 1st January that others in our neighbourhood also lost service during a minor flood event. This sparked Telstra into action and our landline service was restored after 6 weeks. See **Appendix 4. The phone line was not restored until 12th January 2021, six weeks after it went out!**
3. On the **20th January 2021** a planned outage for maintenance by Essential Energy resulted in a failure of the landlines in Rollands Plains and Marlo Merrican for some days, well beyond the pre-planned and preannounced six hours of the power outage.
Scheduled Outage Number: Date: 20th January 2021
4. Landline phones went out at the time of the outage beginning. It was two to three days before phone services were restored.
5. Telstra rang regarding the return of the satellite phone and gave us a code to present to the Post Office in order to return the phone. The Post Office refused to take the phone as they had no authorisation to do so. This was communicated to Telstra on or about the **23rd January 2021** but we heard no more until **mid-May 2021**. When a message was left on our landline service threatening up to \$7,000 in costs if we did not return the

phone. I communicated this to the office of David Gillespie MP. I was reassured by an officer of our local MP that a technician would be organised to come and collect the phone. This subsequently happened on the **30th May**. On or about the **1st June 2021**, a representative of Telstra rang and again abruptly demanded the return of the satellite phone. I informed her of its collection. On stating the name of the technician she stated she knew the man. I'm afraid that I don't recall her name but she tried to explain the confusion over the phone by a breakdown in Telstra's call centre where just two workers were trying to handle all complaints. I suggested that it would be better if call centres were local but she assured me that shareholders in Telstra would not want that extra cost. **See Appendix 3 and Appendix 9**

6. Each time there is a power outage the phones go down as well but phones are not restored at the time of the power restoration.
7. During the clean-up following the flooding neighbours could not ring neighbours to organise assistance in fencing and clearing of flood debris around and in houses. Assistance from family and friends from distant parts, even Port Macquarie could not be organised from the family and friends end over the phone.
8. Most people caught out in this situation do not receive a mobile signal and have little other alternative.
9. During this last outage and the flood, my wife Janette needed to be helicoptered out as her health was failing due a worsening infection that was not responding to prescribed antibiotics. It was only that I signed up for a Skype account that I was able to call for SES help for Janette through the use of our satellite NBN. With a problematic inverter giving unreliable power to the computer and modem I was only just able to complete the procedures necessary to get Janette flown to Port Macquarie Base Hospital.
10. A scheduled outage by Essential Energy on **12th August 2021**, reference number of [REDACTED], brought on another drop out of our landline service. At 11:15 am on the **13th August** our phone service had still not been restored. The Telstra Reference number for this circumstance is [REDACTED] and the complaint number is [REDACTED]. Telstra indicated a technician will be here on the **16th August 2021** between 8am and 12 Noon. The promise of a technician attending was made after I insisted to the call centre employee that I was not going to go through the rigmarole so often complied with on earlier occasions of "turning the phone off and then on again". I assured the call centre person that the fault lay with Telstra, not our local equipment. The technician would attend according to the three times the call centre repeated the caveat that if the fault was found to be in our equipment when I had refused to submit to the above procedure then we would face a cost of at least \$100.00. This was when the promise of a technician on the 16th April was made.
11. Happily, on the **13th August 2021**, a technician arrived at the SCAD and Pillar located at our House Paddock fence arrived on an errand to fix a neighbour's complaint of the same problem. I discussed the issue with him and he proceeded to check power supplies to the line. He stated that there were no power problems at the Exchange 8 kms away at Rollands Plains Hall. There was a dial tone there. He found no problem with power supply at our location. He said it must be a "software problem". This would mean there was a problem with the landline switching to backup power when there was a power outage. He returned to the exchange where he was going to manually throw the switch to get us back on the line. This he did with success.
12. It would appear that this "software problem" has been plaguing us and our 50 neighbours for years now. Each time the short term switch is made and our phone line has been restored. But each time, no solution has been found. This has to change. In the last week, **September 2021**, Janette has been contacted by Telstra who have sought to have the complaint closed. Janette has correctly declined to close the complaint as we still do not have assurance that the "software problem" has been dealt with. See Appendix 1.
13. It is worthwhile to note that Telstra often resort to threats of further charges. This occurred with regard to return of the Satellite Phone, some thousands of dollars, the visit by the technician due on the 16th August again a veiled threat in Anne's response in Appendix 1.

Conclusion:

1. There needs to be a Federal Inquiry with Royal Commission powers into the service provided by Telstra, particularly in regional and remote areas. The degradation of our telephone landline system and the lack of universal coverage of mobile signal is risking people's lives. So too is the tardy manner in which Telstra responds to landline faults. The outsourcing of line work to contractors would appear to be fundamental to this failure of Telstra.

2. Responses to service outage complaints are difficult to obtain due to long wait times for phone contact and seeming inability of India-based internet contacts to understand that there could actually be customers that do not receive mobile signal.
3. Landline services need to be well maintained and faults dealt with within two to three days from the reporting date.
4. Exchanges and mobile towers need to have battery and generator backup that will provide power for at least a week when grid power fails. Lives can be lost due to the failure of landline phone networks in regional areas.
5. Software upgrades need to be frequent and timely to avoid outages.
6. By contrast after the March 21 flood Essential Energy was able to raise or replace 12 power poles and restore power to this valley within a few days of the retreat of flood waters. In flood effected areas a visit was made to every household to ensure safety prior to the restoring of power. Telstra's performance by comparison was abysmal.