



The Country Women's Association of Victoria Inc.

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Patron – Her Excellency the Honourable Linda Dessau AC, Governor of Victoria

Hon Luke Hartsuyker
Chair
2021 Regional Telecommunications Review
Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development
and Communications
GPO Box 594
CANBERRA ACT 2601
secretariat@rtirc.gov.au

Dear Chair

Re: Regional Telecommunications Review 2021: Issues Paper

The Country Women's Association of Victoria welcomes the opportunity to submit a response to the *Regional Telecommunications Review 2021: Issues Paper*. Our attached response is framed within the three major issues identified in the review – adequacy, opportunity and awareness - and addresses questions posed in the *Issues Paper* in respect of these issues.

The CWA of Victoria is the largest women's organisation in Victoria, with some 4,500 members in over 300 Branches across the State, approximately two thirds of whom live in regional, rural or remote Victoria.

Since its formation over 93 years ago, our members have been critically involved in the response to natural disasters, both as communities directly impacted and as a statewide support network for those communities. Access to and use of telecommunications in the event of such disasters has been a critical, life-saving facility for CWA members and their communities.

The CWA of Victoria therefore submits its response to the Regional Telecommunications Review 2021:Issues Paper as a contribution to the provision of critical telecommunications services in regional and rural areas. The Association would welcome the opportunity to discuss these important telecommunication issues with members of the Review Committee.

Yours sincerely

Pam Mawson
State President, CWA of Victoria



**SUBMISSION TO THE REGIONAL TELECOMMUNICATIONS REVIEW 2021:
ISSUES PAPER**

September 2021

The Country Women's Association of Victoria Inc

The Country Women's Association of Victoria welcomes the opportunity to submit a response to the *Regional Telecommunications Review 2021: Issues Paper*. The Association's responses are framed within the three major issues identified in the review – adequacy, opportunity and awareness - and address questions posed in the Issues Paper in respect of these issues.

Who we are

The CWA of Victoria is the largest women's organisation in Victoria, with some 4,500 members in over 300 Branches across the State, approximately two thirds of whom live in regional/rural/remote Victoria.

Since its formation over 90 years ago, the Association's members have been critically involved in the response to natural disasters, both as communities directly impacted and as a statewide support network for those communities. Access to and use of telecommunications in the event of such disasters has been a critical, life-saving facility for CWA members and their communities.

The Association plays a vital role in supporting communities experiencing disasters which include, but are not limited to fire, drought and severe weather conditions. In particular, our members volunteer in the disaster recovery stage with the gathering and distribution of needed goods, providing support and care to those impacted by the events, and providing financial support raised by members, or provided by government for distribution via the Association.

Victoria has experienced significant disaster events in the past four years, including:

- Cobden/ Terang Bush fires, March 2018
- Bunyip/Yinnar Bush fires, March 2019
- Northern Victoria/ South Gippsland Drought 2019 to 2021
- East Gippsland/Northern Victoria Bush fires 2019-2020

The CWA of Victoria has been actively involved in the recovery phase of these disasters and considers it can provide an insight into some of the questions asked by the Review. Some of our members have also been impacted by events of disaster and provide important perspectives based on lived experience.

1.Adequacy

The experience of our members

During the 2019-2020 bushfires, many of our farming members in East Gippsland and Northern Victoria were seriously impacted by the fires. Our members in these affected areas discussed the tragic events with farmers, Country Fire Authority (CFA) members and others, focusing on communication inadequacies and alternatives. As has been the experience during previous disasters, telecommunications services failed to deliver connectivity at a time of extreme threat to life during the 2019-2020 fires. This failure continues to need an urgent, coordinated and funded response.

The CWA of Victoria considers it imperative that we are all able to communicate via technology no matter where one lives or how they are impacted by extreme events.

The recent 2019-2020 fires again highlighted the inadequacies of reliable telecommunication systems, especially in remote communities such as Mallacoota, Orbost and Tubbut, when the 3G/4G communication system completely failed or power was switched off. Towns were stranded with no form of communication. They could not readily access the much-depended-upon local radio stations for vital information, nor the Vic Emergency App. People were told not to rely on their mobile phones and buy battery operated radios. This is satisfactory for information coming in but does not resolve the issue of needing two-way communication.

Some residents have used the traditional mobile phone network. Despite being a wireless service, cellular networks have multiple local/regional infrastructure requirements which must be maintained for the networks to function reliably. The physical cell tower structures require a power source and backhaul through terrestrial circuits to function. Radio wave signals are sent from one ground-based antenna to another and the signal's average distance for transmission is about 21 to 48 kilometers. If transmission towers are impacted, either by being destroyed or their power sources are turned off, then the system fails.

Whilst the Australian Government is improving mobile phone coverage and competition in regional and remote Australia through the Mobile Black Spot Program; it is still reliant on telephone lines and towers which can be compromised, especially in times of natural disaster and emergencies.

2. Opportunity

Increase availability of satellite phones

Satellite phones connect to low earth orbiting or geostationary satellites. These orbiting satellites enable satellite phone service connection in seconds with a clear signal. Satellites are circling earth in different orbits; they have no terrestrial connection requirements to transport data. A satellite's ability to function reliably and with little infrastructure is why it is the chosen technology for first responders and defence forces operating in areas with little or no infrastructure. This technology should be extended to all.

Satellite phones work in most places as they do not rely on the terrestrial cell network. They beam their data directly to and from satellites orbiting earth and are not impacted on a smoke-affected day or at night.

In 2014 the Australian Government's Satellite Phone Subsidy Scheme was in place which allowed residents and businesses without mobile coverage a rebate, on approved satellite phone purchases. This subsidy was only in place for six months. Recent events have proven the further urgent need for the Australian Government to re-introduce a long-term subsidy program.

For members of regional/rural and remote communities throughout Australia to take up this technology, **the CWA of Victoria recommends that the purchase and on-going expenses in relation to the operation of satellite phones or the new SatSleeve technologies be subsidized 100% by tax deductibility.**

Due to the impact of drought in the region, many families were not able to purchase alternative technology, or indeed pay for its ongoing use. For this reason, the Association is asking that tax relief be considered to facilitate keeping families safe and connected to alerts of immediate danger which communities are advised to follow via media channels. It is also imperative that regional and rural communities are able to communicate with police, fire and loved ones, prior, during and after a catastrophic event.

Connecting Mobile phone to the Satellite network

CWA members understand there is technology available that will allow your mobile phone to connect to the satellite network. The new technology is a quick and easy way to transform a compatible smartphone or tablet into a satellite device. Areas where communication has failed or just not supported - where there is no 3G/4G coverage – this technology can keep people connected right across Australia, with 100% coverage wherever they are if there is a line of sight to the satellite.

The CWA of Victoria urges the Government and Telecommunication providers to make this service more available and affordable

3.Awareness

Improving a co-ordinated approach to information provision and education

The CWA of Victoria acknowledges the Review Committee's comments about providing information and education to users about ever-changing telecommunication options.

The CWA of Victoria strongly recommends:

- **That the key messages are developed in consultation with those people who need the information.** Wording, style, languages needed, and form of communication all need to be considered.
- **The use of current, reliable, and respected entities in communities to host/deliver the key messages about technology and which would best suit local conditions.** This option is used in the recovery phases of disasters.
- The CWA of Victoria has over 300 branches across Victoria. The Association has relationships with Telstra which assists our members to access telecommunication information and at the same time provides an opportunity for Telstra to meet users on the ground in their communities. This model could be expanded to include other technology providers.
- It is also common for the CWA of Victoria's established member/branch networks to be used for the delivery of health promotion and community safety programs. Recently the Association partnered with Work Safe Victoria to deliver a safer farming campaign. Again, this strategy can be replicated

The CWA of Victoria would welcome the opportunity to discuss these important telecommunication issues with members of the Review Committee. Please contact our Executive Director, Lynne Jordan on execdirector@cwaofvic.org.au