Regional Telecommunications Independent Review

Submission from Peter Solly ASM AFSM, Rainbow Victoria

I have an interest in telecommunications as a farmer working in a fairly remote area but more as at the efficacy of our systems during emergencies. I have worked as a Community Ambulance Office and in management roles in CFA. I am currently a community representative on the Hindmarsh Shire Municipal Emergency Management Committee.

I participated in the virtual public consultation on Wednesday August 4th.

We need to look at the effectiveness and reliability of the available technology as well as the expectations of the community, particularly in emergency situations.

I grew up on a farm about 6 Km from Rainbow in the 1950's and 60's. Our power supply was a 32 volt battery and generator system. We had a magneto telephone connected via a party line to the local manual exchange on overhead lines.

Our expectation was that we would be able to make and receive telephone calls from the farm house and if there was a fault, drive or walk to neighbours or town for help. Damage to the lines occurred fairly often but was easily found and repaired, usually by local farmers. There was a level of multiple redundancy that enhanced our connection to the rest of the world as the manual exchange was linked to other manual exchanges in every direction.

We also listened to the local ABC radio and spent a lot of time outside looking around.

There is now an expectation that our smart phones will allow us to make calls and have full internet access from anywhere. If there is an emergency, we will be able to make and receive calls, get up to date information and receive targeted alerts. We have become dependent on internet access for many of our daily activities.

We are now finding that as the system and our phones get smarter and that the phone based internet use increases, access areas further from the cell bases has become more difficult. The useful range from cell bases seems to be reducing.

Our fixed telecommunications infrastructure is dependent on mains electricity supply. There is battery backup but we are finding that this is inadequate. Recent power failures have seen all of our Telstra landline and mobile services to fail after about 4 hours.

Our landline and Telstra mobile services now connect to the outside world via a single common optical fibre. There is no redundancy. Damage to this as occurred twice during the installation of the GWM water pipeline around 15

years ago totally isolates us. Repairs are difficult and time consuming. There is an Optus service for those with Optus handset.

There are two issues that I believe need to be addressed.

- Improving reliable coverage to all areas.

- Ensuring reliability by improving backup, redundancy and hardening the technology to reduce the chance of outages. There also needs to be more public awareness that the technology may fail at a critical time.

Real emergencies occur when there are multiple simultaneous events. In January 2018 a storm cell brought down a large tree that blocked a main access road to Rainbow. Three power poles on the only line feeding Rainbow also came down. It was during a designated heatwave and total fire ban. The road was not cleared for 14 hours, It took over 8 hours to restore power. There was no landline phone or Telstra mobile service available for over 4 hours.

*Peter Solly*