

Expressing concern,

We are writing on behalf of the Wittittrin Progress Association Inc. representing the Wittittrin and Yessabah communities near Kempsey on the Mid North Coast of NSW.

Our community was devastated by the 2019 bushfires and now by the recent flood event. These catastrophes have highlighted the serious impact of unreliable telecommunication services in our area. In both instances, members of the community have been placed at significant risk, having no available mobile service and losing all landline function during these disasters. This has impacted an estimated 30-40 properties (possibly more), including many families, business owners and people with medical needs.

The danger and isolation this placed people in became very clear.

Our current situation

- Phone lines to the majority of Wittittrin (along Dungay Creek Rd, west and south of Clarkes Rd) were down since March 19 due to flooding, the earliest restored over a month later on the 26th of April.
- Telstra was made aware of the fault shortly after the 19th. There are a number of homes that months later still had no phone line.
- A Telstra technician inspected flood damage to poles and cables on the 27th of March. We awaited repairs until the 26th of April, when some homes were restored. At that point, some were yet to be restored, with no given time frame for when this will occur.
- There has been some discussion with Telstra technicians that indicated that all phone lines needing complete replacement due to a long history of “patch fixes”, leaving the local infrastructure in disrepair.

The Telstra landline in our area is a vital part of our day-to-day and emergency communications

1. There is no mobile phone reception across the vast majority of our area. For many people, their landline is their only form of telecommunication. Our area is a known Mobile Black Spot (NSW-1936) but has not been included in any of the grants so far, to our knowledge.
2. Our area experiences regular planned and unplanned power outages – we lost power for a minimum of 6 days during the March floods – so even those with internet maintain a landline as an important emergency backup.
3. Some families are on Priority Assist due to life threatening medical conditions.
4. A number of residents live alone, including elderly people, and their landline is their only way to ask for help or for their families to check that they're ok.
5. Our area is home to a number of small business, who need reliable telecommunications to serve their customers and support their families.
6. Even UHF radio is difficult to rely on in an emergency, as our hilly landscape means there is greatly reduced range throughout our area and not all residents have UHF radios.

Lack of telecommunications is not inconvenient: it's dangerous

As study into the complexities of rural life will demonstrate, rural life comes with its own set of physical risks, but we cannot simply step out our front door and call for help or flag down a car if we don't have telecommunications.

We also need reliable communications during natural disasters.

In 2019, catastrophic bush fires swept across our whole valley: burning houses, infrastructure, habitat bushland and valuable pasture, as well as the psychological impact. Some residents were lucky to retain their landline connection during the disaster, and it played an important role in sharing information about the fire with neighbours and keeping people safe. Others lost both power and phone, which placed them in critical danger, with no access to up-to-date information on fire conditions, weather conditions, current warnings etc. Often, people had to resort to physically relaying messages from house-to-house, placing themselves at great personal risk. The RFS, National Parks and other emergency services were also in the area, but without mobile phone reception, they were not able to reliably communicate with even those residents who still had working phones.

In mid-March this year, the valley was severely impacted again, by catastrophic floods that left people stranded on their properties for many days. During this period, we were without power for a minimum of 6 days, some for 10 days.

On the first day of flooding – 19 March – we also lost our phone lines. This made it even more difficult and dangerous to stay in touch with neighbours, notify people about changing flood conditions, and check if people were ok or needed supplies. It also added burden to volunteer organisations such as the SES and RFS, who were unable to make direct contact with residents, and instead needed to rely on other residents to act as physical messengers.

Our lack of phones also impacted our flood recovery effort. It has been more difficult to contact community members to find out what help they need and to share what recovery options are available, which were often time sensitive.

Telecommunication during current COVID conditions

Given current environment of children schooling from home, parents working online from home, the internet has proven ineffective and therefore decreases the community's resilience in such times. Mobile coverage increased is warmly welcomed and can be a medium-term resolution, however providing a NBN cable throughout the main roads with residents would provide improved long term resilience and sustainability. Enabling us to adapt with altering work and schooling environments and even access to online medical help/appointments when able to access such services. The community's current internet access is ADSL2 available via land line. Some properties have NBN running to a certain point on Dungay Creek Road, however, most rely on satellite NBN which is costly with limited in data.

We need help to find a solution

For our protection, and under the current pandemic climate, we need immediate repairs to our landlines in such instances as the natural disasters outlined above, or more critically (given greater reliability) infrastructure that will enable the valley to access mobile phone service. The need for landline alternatives has become very clear through these two natural disasters. Under the pandemic conditions, we recognise that we need more significant access to internet data to carry the additional needs that working/studying from home have created.

Alternatives that rely on internet and electricity are not acceptable as some residents do not have the internet, are not "tech-savvy" or do not have generators. The delay needed to start a generator before making an emergency call could also be life-threatening.

The voice of our community is united. We are crying out for help to ensure the safety and well-being of the residents in this community. We need reliable telecommunication access, available at all times.

The actions of the Wittitrin Progress Association in furthering support for our community

The Wittitrin Community are currently applying for Black Summer Bushfire Grant through resilience Australia for repeaters to be set up, so when we are in emergency and lose access to our mobiles, internet or land lines, we will still be able to all connect. We understand we have responsibilities in assisting and developing our resilience and would really like to work with you in achieving a great outcome for not just our community but others which are similar and facing same concerns.

Further questions/comments/communication can be made to

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