

2021 Regional Telecommunications Review – SUBMISSION

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I am writing this submission as a NSW Central West Farmer who regularly faces telecommunication issues. We have two properties, one at Baldry and the other at Mt Lambie and our business includes sheep, cattle and cropping.

We feel frustrated that we are unable to access basic telecommunication services that most of the Australian population takes for granted, that information on the best solution for us is difficult to obtain and most solutions for improvement of connectivity come at a great cost to us.

It is very difficult as a small community to be heard. Our community at Baldry is not a major regional centre however we are a highly productive agricultural area, located between two major regional centres with large infrastructure running through the district and tourism an important contributor to the region.

I have outlined below our experiences and the impact of poor telecommunications on our district. While this is one area, and our personal experience, it is not unique and is common to many other small regional communities and illustrates the issues and frustrations that we all face.

PHONE CONNECTIVITY

Most of the Baldry district is in a “black spot” for phone connectivity and farmers rely on landlines and wifi calls at the house for any communication. Wifi calls are unreliable, impacted by weather and the particular set ups at individual residences. The impacts of no mobile phone service are:

Farm Safety and efficiency

Farming is a dangerous occupation and it is very concerning when there is no way of contacting workers on farm or calling emergency services should this be required. We are a small business and therefore often working alone and isolated. In the event of an accident there is literally no way to contact emergency services from the paddock.

On large farms, farmers often have to travel long distances to communicate with other workers as they are unable to call them. Two Way Radio's have their limitations, cannot be used from outside the immediate area and are not a reliable back up particularly when working alone.

Poor communication leads to business inefficiencies. Today most farms are trying to do more with less staff and not being able to communicate easily with staff on farm to direct them to the next task or advise them of a change of plan adds cost to businesses as time is critical. It also makes it more difficult to employ staff as many of the more tech savvy younger generation are reluctant to work in areas with no range.

Farm Innovation

Australian Farmers are some of the most innovative, efficient and productive in the world. Any successful farmer utilises new technology to improve their efficiency and output which has important implications for sustainable production.

Without effective mobile phone services many of the new technologies such as GPS, water monitoring devices, market reports, online livestock auctions and banking are not able to be used. Another example is the latest livestock weighing technology relies on wifi for updates and basic functioning and without wifi access it doesn't work. This impacts productivity and puts farmers in these areas at a huge disadvantage. We particularly rely on communication when marketing produce or purchasing inputs. Currently without access to mobiles we have to stop what we are

doing and go back to the house to access either the phone or do business adding precious time to basic tasks particularly when the vast majority have enjoyed these services for many years.

Fire Safety

A massive concern is communication through bush fires. Without mobile phone range, there are very limited ways to contact people within the community and RFS members. We have the Goobang National Park adjoining the Baldry district. The main power lines for the north Parkes mine run through the district and National Park, which has mountain ranges and puts the district in a very high risk category. The Park has a high fuel load with many spots inaccessible where fires can be deliberately lit, started by lightning or fallen power lines. Our property adjoins the Park to the east and if smoke is spotted we will have to go back to the house to use the phone to alert emergency services costing precious time – which may well be the difference to the fire being quickly brought under control or burning thousands of acres causing untold damage.

Tourism and Transport

Baldry is located between the major centres of Parkes and Dubbo. The lack of phone range is a concern for tourists travelling through the area and visiting the National Park. It also causes issues for trucks and other vehicles travelling between the centres. There have been many times when drivers have had to walk kilometres to get assistance.

Different Service Providers

I understand that new towers are put out to tender to the phone companies, so there are now several companies providing phone service to different regional areas. This can be challenging if your work involves travelling long distances or you have farms in different locations when some towers are only available to one service provider and another tower is for another provider. While this may work in heavily populated areas with many phone towers, it causes even more barriers to phone connectivity in regional areas if your phone only works with some towers.

INTERNET

Internet options are also limited by the location. Satellite internet is adequate but not optimal for running a business in this regional area as it can be heavily impacted by weather conditions. This is a hurdle when trying to attract people and businesses to move to regional areas. From a personal perspective, internet banking and zoom meetings can be challenging on the satellite internet available.

There are different providers and options available however sourcing independent, expert advice on the best set up for your situation is very difficult. Often people you are dealing with are city based and do not understand the issues faced in a regional and remote location and as a “layman” it can be hard to distinguish between the different sales pitches.

There are high costs associated with improving your internet through boosters and similar which seems very unfair that this is imposed on regional communities to get average connectivity.

CONCLUSION

In summary:

- There is great stress and frustration caused by the lack of mobile phone service and decent internet in some regional areas.
- It is difficult to access expert independent advice to improve connectivity
- It is discriminatory that regional areas have less access to phone and internet services and have to pay for basic infrastructure to improve services

- While we do not have the large populations of the city areas, Agriculture and Mining are some of the largest contributors to Australia's GDP and should be granted equal access to communication services
- It is important for the regional areas to attract more business and skilled personnel and this is hampered by poor communication connectivity