

# Regional Telecommunications Review 2021



29 September 2021

## MURRAY IRRIGATION – REGIONAL TELECOMMUNICATIONS

Murray Irrigation Limited operates Australia's most efficient open channel water distribution system, delivering reliable productive irrigation water to approximately 2,100 landholdings across 724,000 hectares, with a sub-surface drainage catchment of 25,000 hectares of the Southern Riverina. We are a shareholder owned company.

Farmers, regional communities, industry, and the business community across the Murray Valley are dependent on a telecommunications system that is reliable, functional, and accessible 24/7.

Murray Irrigation see this as a necessity as our business is run virtually using mobile coverage for water delivery and operational activities across the company.

Murray Irrigation has responded to the Australian Government's Regional Telecommunications Review 2021 Issues Paper (July 2021); specifically addressing 10 of the 16 questions.

### **What Telecommunications Services are required in regional Australia to meet current and future needs?**

The farmers that utilise Murray Irrigation's system comprise over 1,300 family farm businesses and contribute more than \$1.5 billion of agricultural production. Murray Irrigation welcomes this opportunity to emphasise to the Regional Telecommunications Independent Review Committee the importance of telecommunications services across the Murray Valley.

It is vital that the businesses in our region have access to comprehensive and reliable telecommunications and digital connectivity to ensure the efficient management of their businesses and to safeguard their economic security. They require full access to reliable mobile voice and data connection, broadband internet, and fixed voice services. Telecommunications services and digital connectivity are vital foundations to support the region's development goals.

Our region is constantly evolving and in coming years we will undertake further economic growth and important environmental initiatives. It is vital that the full range of telecommunications services are updated to keep pace with our growth and economic development. The lack of ability to keep up with demand our region is at risk of losing industry investment and population growth. We recognise that improving digital connectivity has been noted across multiple strategy documents as crucial for economic growth, as well as health and safety. Government needs to be outcomes focused and find solutions to this inherent problem across rural and regional Australia.

The Murray Valley needs access to the full range of telecommunications services for reasons of public safety, as we have many workers operating daily in remote and isolated locations, and to provide access and connectivity for families and older people who may be isolated due to unplanned events such as natural disasters and the COVID-19 pandemic. Hearing impaired people across our region also require access to the various technologies offered by the National Relay Service for deaf and hearing-impaired Australians.

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## **Are there any things that regional communities and businesses need to do but can't on their existing services?**

Any mobile black spots in our region are extremely problematic for our businesses and for the safety of our communities and remote workers. At present, mobile services are only available to 33 per cent of Australia's landmass and it is vital the government can ensure full mobile coverage for voice and data connection and eliminate all black spots across our region.

Our company notes that the major mobile network operators have commenced the roll out of 5G mobile networks for regional Australia and it is vital with the large number of farming businesses in our region that we have access to 5G as soon as possible. We acknowledge that agriculture is a priority sector for government support for the 5G rollout.

## **What changes in demand barriers or challenges need to be addressed when it comes to telecommunications services in regional rural and remote Australia?**

A key challenge for regional communities is accurate information about what specific telecommunications services are available, especially as technology rapidly advances, that best meet the specific needs of each farm and business, and effective education as to how best to use the new technologies available.

## **How do service reliability issues impact on regional communities and businesses? How do outages, including natural disasters, impact on communities and businesses?**

Telecommunications services are critical to regional communities during natural disasters both as a means to link into public information and instructions as to what is happening to remain safe and also for business continuity to safeguard ongoing operations of farms and equipment. If service reliability fails, lives are put at risk and businesses can suffer significant economic loss.

Individuals working in remote areas can take precautions such as carrying battery powered radios, however if voice and internet coverage fails, in particular blackspots, during an emergency the consequences can be severe. Reliable coverage is required to be able access emergency information and warnings, weather updates and to be able to connect with families and other workers.

Murray Irrigation urges the government to ensure that contingency plans are in place and clear instructions are communicated in advance and understood by regional communities if communication networks go down in an emergency.

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## **How did the use of digital services change for regional consumers and businesses during the response to the COVID-19 pandemic? What insights for future service delivery does this provide?**

The COVID-19 pandemic increased isolation for all regional communities for considerable periods of time, including the families and businesses in our region. This has significant impacts for individuals, families, and business, such as safety, economic loss, lack of access to normal market channels and mental health.

Market research undertaken for the Department of Communications by Essence Communications on natural disasters and telecommunications found that as technology has advanced, including digital, Australians have embraced new telecommunications services and integrated their key functionality and conveniences into their everyday lives. However, many Australians overestimate their knowledge and when tested are not able to explain the implications if there is a telecommunications outage. This has particular significance for regional and remote Australians and businesses.

Future learnings could therefore include comprehensive communication and education campaigns at the onset of unforeseen disasters such as the COVID-19 pandemic that assist regional communities to manage digital services in the event of an outage during an emergency situation or prolonged period of isolation.

## **What can be done to improve the access and affordability of telecommunications services in regional, rural, and remote Indigenous communities?**

The Government's Universal Service Obligation, which imposes obligations on the telcos to fund services for remote and regional Australia, indigenous communities, and social and disadvantage initiatives such as those for hearing-impaired Australians, is a very important initiative for regional Australia and should be preserved and enhanced. Without support from the telcos telecommunications services for remote and regional areas would be unaffordable for regional communities.

As the government acknowledges, all Australians should be able to make full use of digital technologies to manage their health and wellbeing and safety, access education and services and participate in the digital economic platform, which is crucial for our region. The government should continue to monitor the relative share of household income being spent on telecommunications services between regional and urban households and ensure that telecommunications remain affordable for regional Australia through such initiatives as the USO Government investment. The Mobile Black Spot Program and the Regional Connectivity Program are very important and must be continued as there are commercial disincentives for the private carriers to provide coverage in remote areas with small populations.

## **How can investment in telecommunications infrastructure work with other programs and policies to encourage economic development in regional Australia?**

New analysis by the Bureau of Communications, Arts and Regional Research (BCARR) estimates that access to ubiquitous high-speed broadband will have a substantial economic impact on Australia's agricultural sector, projecting an additional economic benefit of \$3 billion to \$10.6 billion per year by 2030.

This shows how important it is that regions that support agriculture, forestry and fishing have access to reliable, high-speed broadband services through the National Broadband Network.

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Access to new and emerging technologies and applications that were previously not possible is critical for businesses in our region to be able to constantly enhance productivity and reduce costs.

Ubiquitous high-speed broadband also opens up farmers and enterprises to new global markets which again is extremely important for the businesses across our region.

## **How can Government better support the rapid rollout of and investment in new telecommunications solutions in regional areas?**

Published findings from NBN Co shows that digital farming has the potential to add \$20.3 billion to the value of Australian agriculture by the year 2030 with more than \$15.6 billion of this revenue enabled by the internet. This shows the huge value of the return on investment by the continued roll out of the NBN to regional farming areas and the agricultural supply chain.

Government needs to continue to work in partnership with regional farming communities and to understand their specific needs, to support the continued roll out of effective telecommunications solutions.

## **How can regional consumers be better supported to identify, choose, and use the best connectivity options for their circumstances, as well as to understand and use their consumer rights?**

The government should ensure that effective communication and education campaigns are available for regional communities on the connectivity options available for each region, and how consumers should use them to enhance their individual businesses. The government should remain committed to lifting the digital capabilities for all Australians with a particular focus on regional and remote areas that have issues such as isolation, complex and costly logistics and difficulty in accessing new markets. Specific projects, with government funding, should support connectivity in key regions that require better access to telecommunications services.

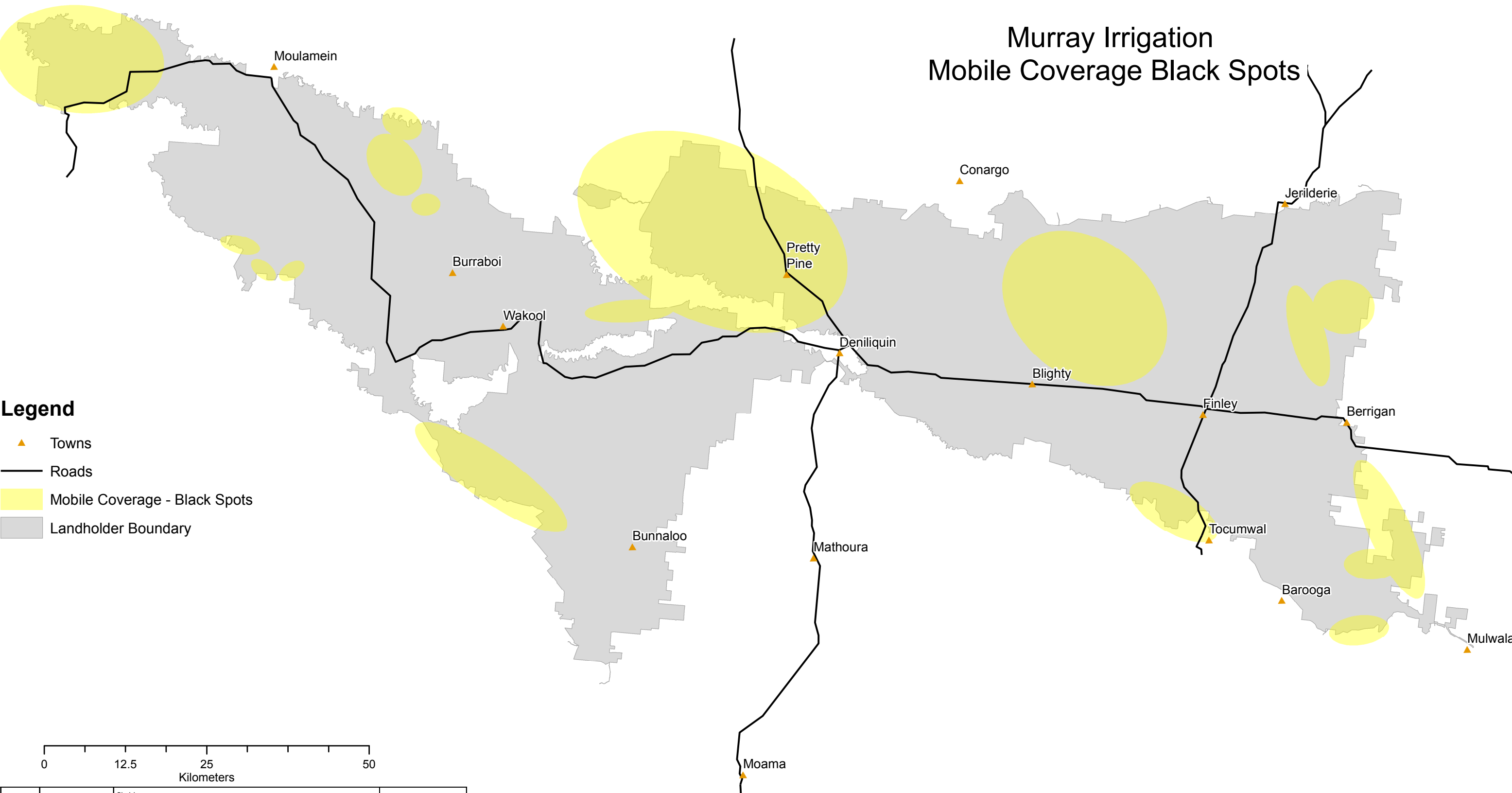
## **To what extent is public information on connectivity options, including predictive coverage data and speeds, sufficient to help regional customers make informed decisions? What other information is needed?**

Communications and education campaigns should be targeted to the needs of each region, for example farming communities will require specific educations as to how connectivity options and new and emerging technologies can directly assist their businesses. Generic information is useful, however tailored education campaigns for each region will maximise the return for investment government is making in the roll out of new telecommunications connectivity and services.

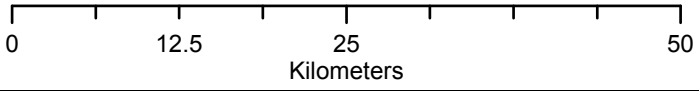
**Philip Endley**  
CEO



# Murray Irrigation Mobile Coverage Black Spots

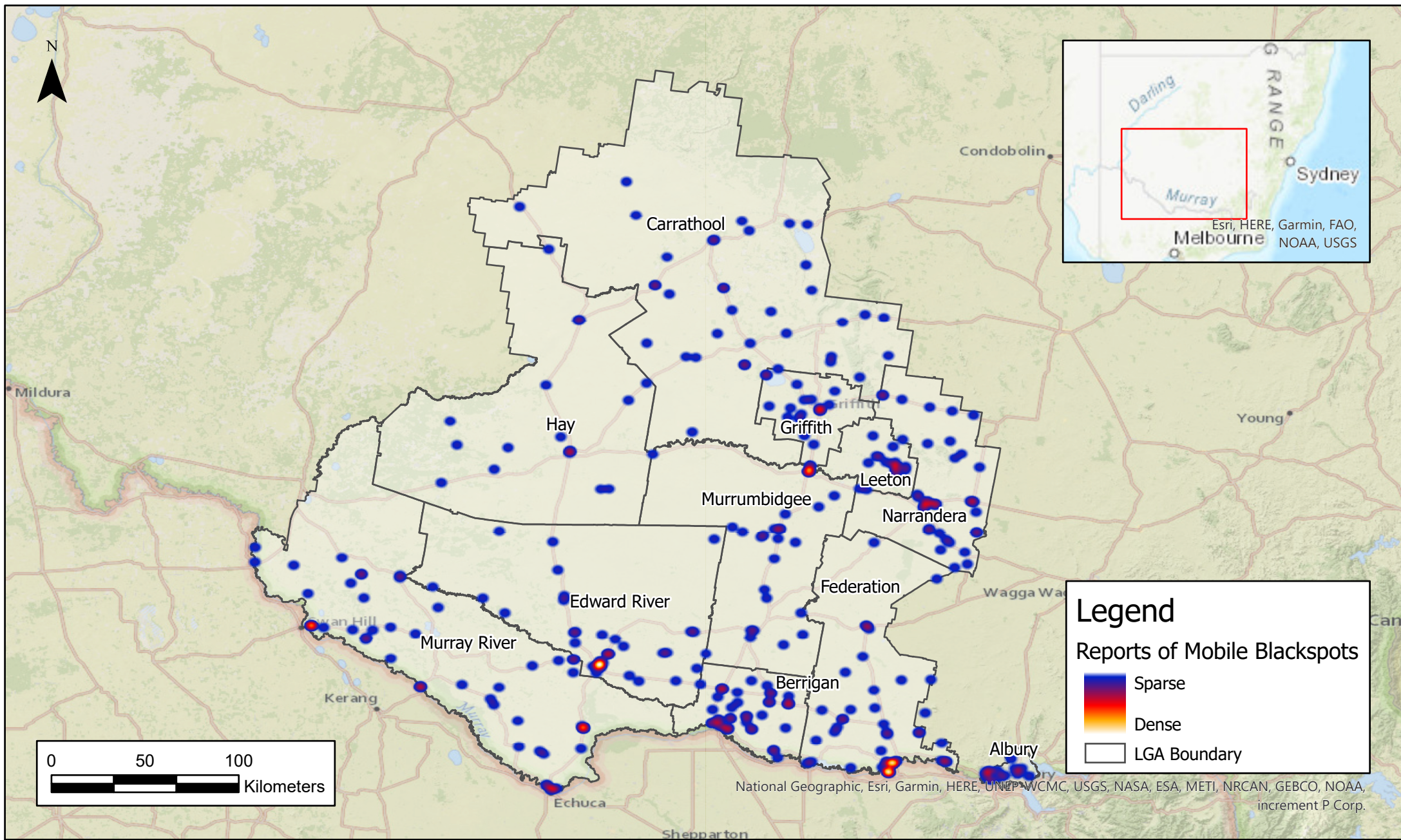


- Legend**
- Towns
  - Roads
  - Mobile Coverage - Black Spots
  - Landholder Boundary



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# Density of Mobile Blackspot Reports in the Riverina and Murray Joint Organisation Area

Author: Giulia Zanotto

Date: 07/08/2020

Geographic Coordinate System: Geocentric Datum of Australia 1994

Sources: Department of Communications and the Arts (2018). Community Reports of Poor or No Mobile Coverage.

Riverina and Murray Joint Organisation (2019). Riverina and Murray Digital Connectivity Survey.