



29th September 2021

The Hon Luke Hartsuyker
Chair
2021 Regional Telecommunications Review Committee
Canberra ACT 2601

Dear Committee

Thank you for the opportunity to provide my submission to the 2021 Regional Telecommunications Review.

I would like to share my lived experience with regard to access, adequacy and awareness of current and emerging telecommunications services.

My husband David, and I run an agricultural business in the Upper Hunter, 12 kilometres out of Merriwa, in NSW.

Increasingly we are pushed to a reliance on the use of telecommunications in our daily lives. We see this in banking, government services such license renewals, vaccination records, making appointments, research for machinery equipment, spare parts, for accounting, livestock management, and herd traceability. The purchase and sale of product, on live auction platforms such as auctions plus, is another example. Many instructions for equipment are also now provided via web sites, chat rooms and youtube instructional videos. I understand also that free to air television, will also be moving to digital platforms.

On farm connectivity is becoming really important with emerging technologies in the agricultural sphere such water sensors, sensor driven cropping data or real time monitoring of livestock health. The adoption of these, to benefit our business is limited by our connectivity, and our digital literacy.

I am also heavily involved in community development, and recognise that digital capability, is essential to enable participation and growth in rural communities.

Young people need the internet just to exist. They will not come to or remain in our rural communities without it. It is no longer, a luxury, but an essential part of their lives. On line education platforms now seek to meet the need for offsite learning for students, and for training or skill development.

We have witnessed this ourselves, in our workforce recruitment, whereby the requirements, of salary and housing, rate second to connectivity queries. We have lost workforce because of poor connectivity.

Which brings me to the personal and business costs we incur to try to provide this. I would estimate we have so far spent in excess of \$6000 to achieve access to

equitable and adequate connectivity for our workforce, which is yet to be fulfilled. The transition to new technologies, from analogue, to 3G to 4G to 5G have been fraught with inability to get advice on how to achieve the connectivity, we have explored satellite, fixed line, and mobile solutions with very limited advice available from service providers. In order to get advice at one point from Telstra, we had to ask our state farming organisation to pursue technical support on our behalf.

Some examples of what we have done

For employees home:

Invested in booster

Connected to NBN satellite service through Skymesh with limited satisfaction

Telstra technician sold us a patch which we were expected to install.

Also sold a additional patch for the shed/workshop area so that the men can work from that position

For our home:

Bought a further booster and a Yargi aerial

Upgraded modems, most recently to a Skyhawk netgear

Technical support from providers has been so appalling, hard to find, so as to be non existent, in despair we have turned to the local electrician. It is difficult to discern which advice is best as the solution put forward from one contradicts the other.

The local electrician has now come, and put up another yargi on our roof, pointing to another tower, and through this he had advised us we will have access to two towers and therefore will increase voice and data capacity. We have been sold a further patch, which we needed, and which we must put up ourselves, and he tells us he will now also have to get a booster.

My husband and I aged 76 and 74 respectively, are both pilots, and have operated our successful business for 50 years. And find for the first time in our lives we have come across barriers and challenges to our business SOLEY because of connectivity and access to adequate voice and data to operate as we are driven to the digital platforms. Take for example, the purchase of livestock, through live online auction, if the platform is lost due to connectivity disruption, a sale or purchase is lost. These are real impacts.

The impact of COVID has been our adult children have relocated from city to our farm, and both professionals, with ongoing work commitments, and three school age children. They find that lack of reliability, impacts their work, for example conference calls on Mlcrosoft Teams, Zoom, or Google platforms, drop out mid-meeting, and for the children their lessons are disruption by connectivity being lost intermittently.

The language from governments of all levels, telling of the regions offering attractive lifestyle prospects may find validation in areas where adequate connectivity is available, but I fear the assessment by those in government of the potential of regional, rural growth, is not matched by the lived experience.

We would welcome population growth, new families, new business's, as opposed to the past centralised modelling, that has seen us lose those people who provide innovation, enthusiasm, and growth for our communities. But to achieve this we need more than solutions that just have commercial viability for providers. Government investment is required.

I do not proprot to have solutions, the huge gap in digital literacy between the developers of telecommunications technology and the end consumers is an immense barrier to finding the best solutions to feel inclusion and confidence in this new digital age. My husband and I could talk you through the instrument panels on aeroplanes, in detail, but find the language around telecommunications completely foreign. Farmers, rural businesses, indeed rural residences, just need the "telecommunications service" to turn up so the jobs can be done. I acknowledge in some areas, real benefits are being delivered, but the gap between those that have the connectivity and those that don't is widening.

I think the following are also important to consider:

- Given this increasing and profound reliance on telecommunications services across all aspects of our lives, why aren't telecommunications services legislated as an essential service?
- Reliable, agnostic, physical, technical support and knowledge needs to be available and accessible to those of us living in the rural, remote and regional areas, to enable us to make the most appropriate decisions of how we access the technology.
- Recognition of the fixed line dependence for those of us who lose connections due to towers down, storms, blackouts, natural disasters such as fires is needed, and supported. We can't run next door to a neighbour, for support if we need it.

I hope this contributes to your deliberations.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "J. M. Hardy". The signature is written in a cursive style with a horizontal line underneath the name.

Julia Hardy

