

Background

The Paroo Shire is regarded as rural and remote, it covers an area of approximately 47,600 square kilometers and is located in far south west Queensland. It has four towns, namely; Cunnamulla, Eulo, Yowah and Wyandra. All four towns have Telstra infrastructure providing landlines, mobile coverage and broadband connection. The town of Cunnamulla has ADSL internet connection available. Rural properties have a DRCS/HCRC telephone service and internet via satellite to the house.

The mobile coverage extends out from the towns in a radius of about 15 kms. The main town of Cunnamulla sits near the centre of the shire and it is between 120 and 150kms to the shire boundary in each direction. The town of Eulo is 70 kms to the west, Wyandra is 100 kms to the north and Yowah is about 140 kms to the north-west.

Primary production in the form of livestock grazing is the main industry of the shire. Opal mining occurs at Yowah, Koroit and other sites within the shire and tourism provides an increasing boost to our local economy.

Q1. What telecommunications services are required in regional Australia to meet current and future needs? Are there any things regional communities and businesses need to do, but can't, on their existing services?

A1. Reliable internet connection with an acceptable speed and sufficient data at an affordable cost and mobile 4G coverage are required throughout the shire.

Things that are unavailable to rural property businesses at present:

- No coverage at cattle yards to complete electronic vendor forms between the truck driver and the livestock owner when stock are being transported.
- No coverage at sheep yards to have electronic identification for sheep
- No coverage to have electronic monitoring of watering facilities
- Slow internet connection with limited data via Sky muster satellite
- Lack of capacity for internet usage during tourist season for those on 3G mobile from the Telstra tower in Cunnamulla

Problems with connections in shire towns:

- Lack of capacity for uploading data to the internet via existing ADSL connection
- Slow internet speed due to high usage at various times
- No internet use during tourist events due to insufficient capacity
- Lack of portal availability for new connections within Cunnamulla

Q2. What changes in demand, barriers or challenges need to be addressed when it comes to telecommunications services in regional, rural and remote Australia?

A2. Cost of providing infrastructure would appear to be the main barrier to improved telecommunication services within the shire.

Q3. How have the Government's policies and programs affected telecommunications service outcomes in regional, rural and remote Australia? How can these be improved?

A3. The current policies and programs have not progressed the roll out of telecommunications services within the shire. There is virtually no mobile coverage along the Balonne Highway to the east of Cunnamulla and the Mitchell Highway to the south. Both these TMR highways are regularly used by heavy freight vehicles and caravanners. It would be of benefit to have a plan stating the extent of telecommunication services required throughout the rural, remote and regional areas from data the government has collected, how the government sees those needs being met and a timeframe to complete.

Q4. How do service reliability issues impact on regional communities and businesses? How do outages, including in natural disasters, impact on communities and businesses?

A4. Service reliability issues have a detrimental impact on rural and remote communities. In Paroo Shire the two communities impacted most at present are Yowah and Eulo. Yowah can be completely disconnected from any form of telecommunication if there is a power outage. The existing battery back-up lasts for only a short period of time and after that the residents and businesses within the town are without telecommunication even after power is restored. This is due to an aged component of the infrastructure requiring a technician to reset it before the system is operational. In Eulo residents lose internet and email use at times during the tourist season when usage is sometimes 200% above normal and there is insufficient capacity to cope with the large number of users. Tourist season also affects internet use for those connected through the Cunnamulla mobile network.

Q5. How might such impacts be addressed to ensure greater reliability? How can the network resilience be addressed in regional areas?

A5. The provision of telecommunication towers to provide mobile coverage along the main highways, in particular to the east and south of Cunnamulla.
Extending the NBN fibre cable from Charleville to Cunnamulla.
Increasing Telstra capacity where needed.

Q6. 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?

A6. Within the shire's towns digital services provided the main way for small businesses to order supplies of stock. It also provided the only way for organisations and government departments to hold meetings so that people in locked down areas could communicate with those in south west Queensland. In the case of those who live on rural properties outside of the town areas, they sometimes have connectivity issues which prevents them joining such meetings.

Reliable connection to digital services could be used to deliver health services, educational services, better communication during natural disasters or emergencies as well as a multitude of business and agribusiness services.

Q7. What can be done to improve the access and affordability of telecommunications services in regional, rural and remote indigenous communities?

A7. This question is not applicable to Paroo Shire.

Q8. How can investment in telecommunications infrastructure work with other programs and policies to encourage economic development in regional Australia?

A8. Economic development in regional Australia requires adequate connectivity to digital services to succeed so it is essential for programs and policies to recognize this and incorporate the provision of relevant telecommunications infrastructure within the program planning and any relevant policies.

Q9. What role could innovation, including new models, alternative investors or new ways of doing business, play to encourage investment in regional telecommunications infrastructure? What are the barriers?

A9. One of the barriers seems to be a lack of interested parties willing to invest in rural and remote telecommunications possibly due to the perceived poor monetary return on investment. Communities such as Paroo Shire are promoting their areas to encourage economic development, trying to attract business operators and new businesses. There should be support for new innovation or new models to be tried in regional areas.

Q10. To what extent will new technologies enable significant change to the delivery of telecommunications services in regional Australia over the next 5-10 years? Are there any barriers to accessing these technologies?

A10. New technologies improve the delivery of telecommunication services, however, the rollout process is slow so there may only be some change within our shire over the next 5 years, it may take up to 10 years to see significant change and that timeframe is a barrier in itself to progressing rural and remote areas. New technology tends to be tried in regional areas where there is more population.

Q11. How can Government better support the rapid rollout of and investment in new telecommunications solutions in regional areas?

A11. Reviewing and changing existing programs that are not achieving the required outcomes, such as the Mobile Black Spot Program. Rural and remote Councils need financial support in order to co-fund infrastructure investment.

If a new technology solution has been proven to suit rural and remote areas, Government support programs to encourage investment could be offered through local governments. Every local government area will be able to prioritise its digital connectivity requirements and if suitable funding programs are available that should support a more rapid rollout.

Q12. How can different levels of Government, the telecommunications industry and regional communities better co-ordinate their efforts to improve telecommunications in regional Australia?

A12. Groups of regional communities in each state, like the Western Qld. Alliance of Councils that represents rural and remote communities in 22 LGAs, could collect, collate and document what is needed to improve telecommunications across their area, likewise the telecommunications industry should do the same in relation to what they can offer and then the State and Federal Governments could work with that resultant information to better co-ordinate improved telecommunications in regional Australia.

Q13. What changes to Government investment programs are required to ensure they continue to be effective in delivering improved telecommunications?

A13. The model for the Mobile Black Spot Program whereby applicants for the funding were required to approach and negotiate working with the telecommunications service provider did not operate successfully. The telecommunications service provider had already decided on what projects they would undertake and included upgrading existing infrastructure rather than providing new infrastructure to areas without mobile coverage.

Q14. 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?

A14. Most rural property consumers in the Paroo Shire have connection through the NBN Sky muster satellite. This service allocates only a certain amount of data and if more is used, it is expensive plus the service operates at a slower than acceptable speed. Consumers in Cunnamulla choose to use the Telstra 4G mobile network which offers unlimited data and is less costly. This is resulting in usage within the town exceeding the capacity of the network and at times the internet is unusable as the speed is so slow. At present there is little support to assist consumers make the best choice for their circumstances but at the same time their choices are limited.

Q15. 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?

A15. It is difficult in rural and remote communities to obtain the basic public information on connectivity options when service providers do not have a presence. Perhaps a government agency or community organization could be supported and tasked with providing this information. In the case of Cunnamulla, there is little information available locally about NBN satellite broadband.

Q16. What other matters should the Committee consider in its review and why are they important?

A16. Lack of communication over the Paroo Shire in the case of accidents and emergencies is an issue the local emergency services personnel struggle with. This past year has seen significant increases in the number of tourists, predominantly caravanners, travelling the outback roads. Road accidents often involving caravans, heavy vehicle accidents usually involving livestock and bushfires are the main emergencies that occur outside of mobile network range.