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Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to the 2021 Regional Telecommunications Review. By way of background, this submission refers to my experience in the region from Tumut and Tumbarumba in the west to the coast in the east; from Yass and Braidwood in the north, to the Victorian border in the south. It encompasses discussions I had with people from across this region from 2018 to the present, a recent community session and my own experience having grown up here and returned in 2005 when satellite internet became available. The availability of satellite internet on our family farm meant that I was able to undertake my business (international development consultant and evaluator) from there.

Please find my submission on the following pages, completed as responses to the relevant questions the Review is addressing.

Sincerely,


Dr Fiona Kotvojs GAICD

1. 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?

The list of required telecommunications services to meet current and future needs is extensive, however the summary would be that regional communities and businesses need reliable phone and internet services.

Reliability is at least as critical, if not more so, than provision of the service. When one has a service, as an individual or a business, you arrange elements of personal or business operations around this service. If the service fails for extended periods and/or repeatedly, this has significant impacts (refer question 4).

Quite often, areas of unreliable landline services also have unreliable mobile phone services. Several examples are Talbingo (for a flavour of the issues, refer <https://www.facebook.com/groups/520221022198526/search/?q=mobile>), Dignams Creek (landlines rarely work during periods of wet weather and mobile coverage is poor and unreliable), and Yowrie and Wandela (refer <https://www.facebook.com/groups/TelcoSEComplaints>). As a consequence, people in these areas have no means of accessing reliable communications.

Limited availability prevents application of technological options to improve existing business. For example, without connectivity, security systems can not be installed on more remote areas of a property, efficiency of use of water for irrigation cannot be achieved as this is dependent on automatic monitoring of soil moisture levels, on-line tourism experiences are limited as data can not be shared (for example, live truffle hunts, stockhorse work, wildlife viewing). This also prevents new businesses establishing in the area.

As a minimum, continuous mobile phone reception should be available along all highways and major roads. For example, in the Eden Monaro electorate, there is no highway where continuous coverage is available. This includes Princes, Kings and Snowy Highway; in addition to Elliott Way. This lack of continuous cover reduces efficiency as many people spend significant time in vehicles due to distances between communities. It also creates issues for safety when travelling on these roads.

Improved bandwidth and speed is also required. As an example, we have satellite internet but need to turn the video off to be able to have an effective zoom session. If this is not done, the audio is slow, distorted and/or incomprehensible. During school holidays constraints to bandwidth become more noticeable. This is for two reasons: (i) tourists coming to the local area using internet and thereby increasing demand and (ii) school students at home resulting in increased internet usage.

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

There is an increasing demand from business customers that we will be able to provide services dependent on quality telecommunications services. This includes responding to queries instantaneously, online sales, providing access to quality internet and mobile for tourists, and providing a greater range of services.

Covid has demonstrated the need for quality telecommunications services in rural and regional areas. Locally, many families have experienced difficulty with delivering remote learning to their children as a consequence of poor connectivity (this could be no service or limited service). In some cases, having several children trying to access internet slowed the service to such an extent that the service was so slow it could not be used. In others, it prevented parents being able to use the service for business purposes at the same time.

Refer also response to question 1.

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

The contribution that effective telecommunications makes to regional Australia, and to improving economies and well-being of communities and individuals is well recognised (Productivity Commission, 2017). As a consequence, the Federal Liberal Government has invested in the rollout of the National Broadband Network and the Mobile Black Spot Program. As a result, the Rounds 1 – 4 of the Program included solutions for 31 locations in the Eden - Monaro Electorate. Additional locations were included in Round 5 and 5A.

The contribution of the Black Spot Program to those in isolated areas is excellent. It transforms well-being, stress levels, safety, and the economy.

However, the process for planning and installation is slow; timeframes unrealistic; it lacks transparency on why specific locations are/are not included and the timeframe for installation of a specific solution; is limited in solutions that can be applied (thus limiting locations where the problems can be resolved). While recognising that there are issues associated with landownership and providing power to many of the sites, it is critical that realistic timeframes and reasons for this were made clear (and repeated). At Carwoola, Telstra have advised extensive delays were due to gaining approval from landowners to instal required infrastructure on preferred locations and ultimately led to the work not being able to be progressed. Other stations have also not been installed in preferred locations due to inability to obtain landowner approval. It is also likely that increased transparency and community consultation may help overcome these constraints more quickly.

In addition, the reasons that locations are/aren't selected should be made clear, and a diversity of options enabled. I note that the increase in options considered under Round 5A was a positive and enabled solutions to be implemented in areas such as Snowy Rivers LGA that could previously not have been adopted. Similarly the trials of other approaches being implemented under Round 5A are welcomed.

In 2017, some \$220m was spent on this program. This is just under 1 percent of the expenditure in rural and regional Australia (Productivity Commission, 2017). While there are always numerous competing demands on funding, increased investment (absolute and as a proportion of the total invested in rural and regional Australia) in telecommunications services would be beneficial. It would be useful to have a study done to

determine what investments gave the best return (including valuing social costs and benefits) in rural and regional areas.

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

To provide a really clear indicator of the issues associated with service reliability, I recommend viewing <https://www.facebook.com/groups/TelcoSEComplaints>. This is a Facebook group established by the community for those impacted by the issues with the tower at Peak Alone, many of whom have no landline service available. This tower was regularly not working over many years. This impacted residents in Wandella, Yowrie and Dignams Creek. The group was started in June 2019 after years of frustration with inadequate service and lack of response by Telstra. The traffic on the site for the next six months is high and provides an excellent overview of the issues in real time.

After the issues were addressed in July 2019, stress levels decreased among the local community and there was only one comment on a community Facebook *“our reception is best it’s ever been. I can now talk on my mobile in the house. 3 bars where before we had sos or no service. Big improvement since 31 July which is when I recall you said the tower would be finished.”* This is in contrast to numerous comments on a daily basis prior to this from the time the Facebook site was established. Without the tower, it is likely the loss of life in the Cobargo region due to the Black Summer bushfires (less than six-months later) would have been much higher as the ability to warn people of the fire would have been curtailed.

Using this location as an example, in summary, the impacts are in terms of: (i) safety; (ii) business damage; (iii) additional costs; (iv) frustration with no service and the response when you call to report an outage; and (v) inappropriateness of paying for a service that is unreliable or not there.

- a. *Safety*: For those who have serious illness, lack of reliability of communications puts their life at risk. In Yowrie, this means those with chronic health conditions, those who have accidents on the farm (for example, rolling a tractor, bitten by snake, gored by cattle, ...) can’t contact the ambulance. This can be life threatening. A further example, of one woman who has a life dependent alert system that is links to the mobile service. This will not work, the ambulance will not be alerted if she collapses, and she is likely to die (refer <https://www.begadistrictnews.com.au/story/5856023/human-story-goes-unheard-over-telstra-reception-issues-at-wandella-yowrie/?cs=7516&fbclid=IwAR0TuOfiLXeiMylnTk-wQtY25llscp5wA8Oyi8g2kqxdu7JxA5SUCHbSooofunnd>)

Being immediately adjacent to a large national park, Yowrie, Wandella and Dignams Creek face a high bush fire risk. The National Park is to the west of these communities – the direction that serious bushfires come from in this area. This was noted in communications to Telstra in January 2019. Without effective communications, in such locations lives will be lost as people can not be warned of an approaching fire. Had the Peak Alone tower not been rectified before the Black Summer fires, we would have lost more lives than the two that did occur. At the moment areas such as Brogo are at risk as they have unreliable and limited phone service.

A number of members of the SES and RFS live in Yowrie, Wandella and Dignams Creek. Some depend on mobile calls to respond to emergencies. Prior to rectification of the tower, these emergency service

volunteers did not receive alerts to the emergencies. One SES member advised that they were unable to respond to emergency calls over the Christmas period as there was no mobile phone service, so they did not receive the calls. This could lead to loss of life. This is also reflected in the Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements 2020.

In other cases, major roads pass through isolated areas. In these cases (for example, Elliot Way), reporting a traffic accident on these roads in a timely manner would require mobile phone coverage. However, this is often limited. This places lives at risk.

- b. *Business.* For many who received mobile phone access through Peak Alone, business has been adversely affected. In my own case, I have not received calls which offered contracts for evaluation assignments. This meant loss of income. I have not been able to perform work from my home office but had to drive to town to complete calls. Others have missed calls about products they sell, again, loss of sales and income. Some living in this area provide support to state-wide systems. For example, one Telstra client supports the NSW Health Cancer Division treatment computer system. Provision of this support is completely dependent on the availability of mobile phone (and through this, internet) service. An unreliable service may mean that the Division's computer system is not operational when it should be.
- c. *Additional costs.* The failure of Telstra to provide accurate advice in regards outages means that some customers have experienced significant additional costs. For example, one customer was advised that the problem was with her phone and she needed to replace it. Based on this advice, she purchased a new phone, which did not work because the problem was with the service provided, not her phone.

The solution proposed by Telstra to many customers is for the customer to purchase a booster. The cost is some \$2,000 installed (in this case, if it doesn't work, Telstra will refund the cost) or \$800 if you do it yourself (in this case, Telstra will not refund the cost if it doesn't improve the signal). For all, this is a cost that they should not have to incur to access a service for which they are already paying. For many, this cost is prohibitive.

No refund is provided for a service that Telstra fails to provide unless the outage is reported by the customer. The challenge in doing this is discussed in the next point.

- d. *Frustration and stress.* Reporting an outage may involve a 30-minute drive to somewhere that does have reception, a two hour wait and call time, speaking to someone who goes through a 'fix' process involving unplugging your phone or rebooting it (which is not possible when you are 30 min from home), swapping sim cards in mobile phones; their refusal to proceed until you have done this. ... As you can imagine, this increases frustration and stress in an already stressful situation, particularly when lack of service is a frequent occurrence that must be reported to get a refund for the period of outage. As a consequence, most people give up reporting repeatedly out of order services and continue to pay for a non-functioning service.

I note that this problem is not limited to mobile services. Residents in Dignams Creek (as an example), lose landline service after rain. They have been told that as it is an old copper wire service, water gets into some of the joins and causes this problem when there is rain. The result can be unserviceable lines for a week or more. During dry cycles (drought) this is not a problem. During wet cycles, this is a regular problem that few now report as it will not be fixed before the line has 'dried out'.

6. 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?

Refer Q2.

In addition, use of facilities such as telehealth increased. This demonstrated the ability to provide access to health services more broadly to regional and remote areas. This should be continued post Covid, but requires improved telecommunications services.

The use during Covid indicates we need: broader coverage and increased bandwidth and speed.

9. 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?

At the moment, support through the Black Spot program is driven by the major service providers. Meetings arranged by the Carwoola community indicated that there are a range of alternative mechanisms to provide services using smaller, community based approaches that are suitable for specific geographic contexts. These should be investigated and increased flexibility provided to enable some of these solutions to be supported.

It appears that some of these solutions are being adopted in Round 5A of the Black Spot Mobile program in Snowy Rivers LGA. This looks likely to help overcome some of the issues faced by smaller communities in these areas. This should be encouraged more.

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

Refer Q9

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

A major constraint to the mobile blackspot program appears to be obtaining access to a suitable site on which to install the facilities. Several sites have not proceeded as a agreements required for a site could not be achieved. As a result they were considered 'frustrated' and the funds returned.

Mechanisms to facilitate all levels of Government and the community working together with the telecom provider to identify suitable sites would be advantageous. From discussions, having someone other than the telco provider facilitate this may be beneficial as they would be seen as impartial.

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

The increase in options considered under Round 5A is a positive and enabled solutions to be implemented in areas such as Snowy Rivers LGA that could previously not have been adopted. Similarly, the trials of other approaches being implemented under Round 5A are welcomed. These should be continued and expanded.

14. 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 extent of support already available to regional consumers to identify, choose and use the best connectivity options for their circumstances is quite high. However, few people are aware of this support. For example, I recently organised a community meeting for the residents in Brogo and Telstra and NBN. During this meeting, we all learnt about the extensive support available of which none of the participants had previously been aware. Rather than expand this support, greater awareness of the available support should be promoted. This may be through appropriate marketing campaigns.

Service providers should be required to include mechanisms in their system that automatically identify when services are not working and not charge the consumer for these services. In addition, some form of payment where services do not meet minimum reliability standards may increase focus on reliability.

Many consumers have contacted the Communication Ombudsman for support to address issues with Telstra. However, the process is either slow, complicated or onerous and fails. I do not know of anyone who has achieved a solution to their issue through this Office.

15. 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?

While information on coverage and speeds would be of interest, it is unlikely to change the decision of many. The reason is that many regional areas have only one service provider. As a consequence, the differences in speed of different providers is irrelevant.

This lack of choice also means that there is no business motivation for a service provider to provide good service – customers have no where else to go.

REFERENCES

Productivity Commission 2017, *Transitioning Regional Economies*, Study Report, Canberra

Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements 2020, *Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements Report* 28 October 2020. Canberra