

2021 Regional Telecommunications Review Secretariat
Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Communications
GPO Box 594
CANBERRA ACT 2601
Via email: secretariat@rtirc.gov.au

27th September 2021

Dear Secretariat

Thank you for the opportunity to provide feedback through the Regional Telecommunications Review 2021.

Regional business and consumer in the caravan and camping industry are significant stakeholders in the improvement and investment of regional telecommunications. With an estimated 2000 caravan parks around Australia, and more than 90% of these in regional and rural areas, as a business segment they provide a vital service for tourism and other linkages in their local economies.

Unfortunately, due to their dispersed nature, caravan parks are in many of the least connected parts of Australia, particularly in outback Queensland, Northern Territory, Western Australia and outback South Australia. A priority focus for this review needs to look at the issues that lack of connectivity has regarding road safety, business operations and guest experience as these issues are fundamental to the operations of the safe and successful caravan and camping industry.

Further to this, integrating these findings with other government agendas, particularly the Northern Australia agenda, will provide additional avenues for industry & government to work together to improve the connectivity of regional and remote Australia, and ensure that these areas are not left behind as the needs of business and consumer continue to change and adapt.

Please do not hesitate to reach out if you require additional information regarding this submission.

Yours Sincerely



Stuart Lamont
Chief Executive Office
Caravan Industry Association of Australia

About Caravan Industry Association of Australia

Caravan Industry Association of Australia operates as a member-funded, non-for-profit industry association with a vision *'to lead and champion a safe, compliant and sustainable caravanning & camping industry'*. Caravan Industry Association of Australia represents more than 6000 businesses across the supply chain of the caravan industry from manufacturing & supply side enterprises to tourism delivery businesses including caravan parks and RV rental companies.

Members of Caravan Industry Association of Australia are:

- Caravan, Camping and Touring Industry and Manufactured Housing Industry Association of NSW Limited
- Caravan Industry Association Western Australia Incorporated
- Northern Territory Caravan Parks Association Incorporated
- Caravan Trade and Industries Association of Queensland
- Caravan Parks Association of Queensland Limited
- Caravan and Camping Industries Association of South Australia Incorporated
- Caravan Parks Association of South Australia Incorporated
- Caravanning Tasmania Incorporated
- Victorian Caravan Parks Association Inc.
- Caravan Trade and Industries Association of Victoria

The caravan and camping industry is significant in Australia as evidenced by the following:

- The total value of the caravanning and camping industry to the Australian economy annually is an estimated \$23 billion.
- The caravanning and camping industry has 53,000 direct employees in Australia.
- 741,000 recreational vehicles (RVs) were registered across the country as of 31 January 2020 an annual increase of 4.5%.

There are approximately 2000 caravan parks located around Australia; the vast majority being in regional areas (>95%).

Introduction

As the largest provider of holiday accommodation in Regional Australia, caravan parks and the broader camping sector are significant stakeholders in regional economies and are highly dependent on being connected.

Caravan and camping travellers accounted for 13.6M trips in Australia in the 12 months to June (Tourism Research Australia) and 53M nights around Australia. This marks the strongest performance of the sector in terms of trips in history, despite lockdowns, state border closures and other disruptions including natural disasters. There has been strong uptake of caravan and camping from new markets that brings new challenges in preparing travellers for the difference in travelling in regional & remote Australia.

These challenges include being prepared for a trip where the majority of which will occur without mobile coverage, long distances between accommodation & supply stops and unsealed roads which may increase the risk of a road safety incident.

92% of caravan and camping nights are in regional Australia, indicating that this travelling cohort is the most likely to be in regional or remote area when the need to connect to an emergency service or other service provider is likely to occur.

Both the caravan and camping consumer community and the business community stand to benefit from upgraded telecommunication infrastructure, particularly the reduction in mobile blackspots, but also more consistent internet coverage.

The Importance of Telecommunications & Connectivity in the Caravan and Camping Industry

See below response to several of the key themes from the Terms of Reference and questions.

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?

General Business Operations

Access to the internet and mobile phone coverage is pivotal to the function of a caravan parks. This is not only due to being able to take guest bookings, but also to maintain their own supply chains, particularly in remote areas.

Caravan parks in areas at risk of less mobile & internet coverage areas will often provide more than just a place to sleep, with supermarkets and other amenities including (but not limited to) fuel, water and other essential supplies. In order to fulfil this, both mobile phone coverage and internet coverage is obviously preferred, however a single mode of communication is required at the bare minimum at all times.

The past three years has seen a shift in the internet services used by caravan park with take up of the NBN. Use of ADSL remains high in remote areas (it is particularly noted in regional Queensland) and some caravan parks are still relying on a 4G connection through their mobile device.

Caravan Park Comments

“We had no mobile coverage back 3 years ago but now there is intermittent coverage with Telstra. Other telco services receive no coverage.”

“Internet has improved with NBN, but Mobile reception is not consistent. A lot of black spots within 5km of town/tower”

“Unreliable service although the signal towers are located 5 minutes away from our caravan park.”

Complying with Health Directives

Around Australia, as each state manages COVID-19 and adjusts the health orders accordingly, it is increasingly the case that businesses are required to collect the details of individuals staying/visiting their premises. This is generally through QR codes and other digital methods which are often inaccessible as ‘online forms’ in areas that lack the connectivity.

As a result, poor connectivity places an additional risk on the business in terms of complying with health orders. Other, manual substitutions for this are not practical and hinder the ability to contact trace for state health departments.

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

Guest Experience

Increasingly caravan park guests are expecting online booking functionality, in line with many other accommodation providers. However, the influx of new demographics to the caravan and camping market has led to some travellers expectations not being met when travelling in rural Australia by being unable to book in ahead of time.

Use of apps and other mobile platforms is increasingly common amongst road users, and it is vital that a technological divide does not occur between regional and urban tourism destinations. This will be amplified as international tourism gradually returns to Australia

Emergency Management

Technology has made emergency management in a caravan park more efficient with park managers able to distribute information effectively and efficiently through text messages and emails. This includes accessing information regarding natural disaster and, as we have seen through the previous 18 months, COVID-19 outbreaks.

Unfortunately, parks in 'at risk' locations when it comes to natural disasters, as well as being distanced from public health facilities, are also often the parks that have the most unreliable internet and mobile phone reception.

Access to the most up to date warnings, whether it be fire, flood or COVID-19 exposure site is vital, and amplified in areas where there is a higher density of travellers, such as caravan parks.

Road Safety

With caravan and camping travel being the preferred method of travel in regional and remote Australia and often this type of travel involving the towing of a vehicle; road safety is a critical concern. When an accident occurs it is vital that help can be reached; with mobile phone coverage again being the best way to do this. While some caravanners use a UHF radio or a satellite phone; this is far from the norm and Caravan Industry Association of Australia is seeing that with a large number of new caravanners on the road, this method of communication is rare.

Business Support

Since 2020, the impacts of COVID-19 and business disruptions have not only impacted the bottom line of businesses, but also the mental well-being and welfare of business owners (particularly SMEs). A response to this from many industry associations, including Caravan Industry Association of Australia and member state associations, has been to increase the level of member support offered through webinars, catch up sessions, mental health & well-being advice and other offerings.

Traditionally this has been done face to face, with the caravan and camping industry having upwards of 100 shows, forums, conferences and events that industry businesses had the opportunity to attend and meet colleagues. Obviously, this was significantly challenged in the past 18 months.

With industry associations increasing their digital offerings to members, in terms of support, it remained reliant on being able to connect with businesses. Unfortunately, many isolated businesses that were experiencing the poorest outcomes from a business perspective, were also the most at risk of social isolation.

Caravan Park Comments

"We have lost connectivity for weeks at a time, required the ombudsman to intercede. It continues to drop out regularly within a 24 hour period. Telstra's only advice - get a satellite. We've had satellite before - it is expensive, limited service and does not work during extreme weather conditions where you may need to contact 000."

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

Northern Australia Agenda

The recent renewed focus on Northern Australia is a positive intention to activate more regions and champion growth in these communities and businesses. However underpinning this needs to be solid regional telecommunication infrastructure with this review being pivotal in developing that and

recognising it as a key barrier to businesses that may otherwise be in a position to move their operations to Northern Australia.

Development in Northern Australia has been slow, despite the creation of this as a policy agenda federally more than a decade ago. A core improvement to business conditions in this area will be around improved connectivity, which should be supported by the findings of the Regional Telecommunications Review.

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