

REGIONAL TELECOMMUNICATIONS REVIEW

Individual submission from Jonathan Gaul

REVIEW SUBMISSIONS EXTENSION

In my experience while this three-yearly review is the most important yet held by the Australian Government, there has been inadequate publicity calling for submissions from ordinary citizens in the regions (certainly in southeast NSW). Accordingly, the period for acceptance of submissions from the public should be extended from 30 September 2021 until 1st December 2021 accompanied by more effective and extensive publicity and advertising.

AFFORDABLE REGIONAL CONNECTIVITY IMPROVEMENT IS VITAL

The pandemic experience highlights the vital importance of continuously improving and affordable connectivity for the regions, whether for economic, health, education, communications, social cohesion, public safety or several other subsidiary reasons. Future policy and regulation settings must encourage this growth, innovation, competition and cost-effectiveness to ensure regional Australia remains productive, competitive, cohesive and safe.

Regional Economic Growth

The COVID-induced exodus from the cities to the regions will only be sustained and developed with sufficient constantly-improving and affordable levels of connectivity to allow more employees to work from the regions and allow the creation and expansion of cost-competitive regionally-based small to medium enterprises (SMEs) offering additional regional job opportunities. Conversely, the traditional exodus of young people from the regions to the cities seeking work and career development can be modified by connectivity. For those reasons, connectivity should have the highest priority - higher for example than roads. Connectivity-driven regional growth offers many clear benefits and costs advantages over the costs of provision of infrastructure and public services in the major cities. The Australian Government should facilitate the phasing out of ageing satellite services to be replaced by the new generation Low Earth Orbiting Satellites (LEOs).

Regional Health

The huge regional expansion of Telehealth delivering medical services by voice and videoconferencing during the COVID pandemic is the tip of the iceberg of what may be achieved with regional digital health strategies, given sufficient and improving public/private investment in regional connectivity. Connectivity offers the potential to lessen and potentially close the health gap between the regions and the cities, whereby rates of disease and death are consistently higher in the regions. The regional health gap results from issues like poor access to primary and specialist diagnosis; lower bulk billing rates; costly travel and sustenance to larger centres for specialist treatments; lower SEIFA ratings; fewer special units for oncology, cardiac, stroke; and so on.

Regional Education

The pandemic has dramatically accelerated the incidence and utility of screen learning as students and undergraduates have been obliged to lockdown from schools and campuses. High-speed internet has been fundamental to this process. Conventional classroom and lecture theatre learning will of course resume, but never more at pre-pandemic levels. The pandemic impetus will continue to drive the growth of satellite campuses, regional university centres and other forms and levels of online learning - all dependant on sufficient and constantly improving connectivity to be provided by both public and private investments. These improvements and innovations are essential to

REGIONAL COMMUNICATIONS LAG BEHIND

Notwithstanding continuing improvement over the past decade, regional communications continue to lag well behind the cities. This is particularly evident in south east NSW, roughly

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corresponding the to Federal electorate of Eden-Monaro within which regional communications are characterised by gaps and fragmentation and high consumer costs.

Mobile phone coverage

Gaps in mobile phone coverage along major roads in southeast NSW - let alone for secondary roads - continue, to the detriment of public safety, health, tourism and other commerce, agriculture, education and social cohesion. From my personal experience, major links like the Princes Highway in the far south, the Snowy Mountains Highway (particularly between Nimmitabel and Cooma), the Monaro Highway, and the Alpine Way all suffer from mobile dead spots and weak spots disrupting regional communications. Residents across Eden-Monaro will have myriad similar examples.

ABC Radio and emergency broadcasting

As one of the 60 local radio stations filling the role of emergency broadcasters, ABC Southeast Radio out of Bega 2550 has amongst the worst reception on air. Commercial radio and other ABC channels like ABC-RN, ABC Classic FM, Triple J are far superior - as are a number of community radio broadcasters. In parts of the far south coast and Monaro, ABC Southeast can be relied upon sufficiently as the emergency broadcaster. Major improvements in reception or alternative arrangements are essential.

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