

To: The 2021 Regional Telecommunications Independent Review Committee

I am writing this submission because we have severely inadequate telecommunications services in many parts of our Matcham Holgate valleys on the Central Coast, NSW. In comparison to most urban areas, whether it be Sydney, 80 kilometres away, or the next suburb 3 kilometres away, we do not have equitable access to telecommunications services. In particular, we would be prime candidates for inclusion in the Government's Mobile Black Spot Program, especially with the additional reliance on all forms of connectivity in our current Covid-19 existence.

In 2017 I sent a submission to the Joint Standing Committee on the National Broadband Network, outlining my concerns in regards to the introduction of NBN in the Matcham NSW area. My primary concern was that with the NBN being reliant on the electricity service, once there was an outage we would not be able to contact anyone with our landline in the event of emergency. We do have mobiles but these rarely work in our part of Matcham in order to make or receive calls, and only very intermittently with Whatsapp or text messaging.

We have been with the NBN since December 2019 and unfortunately our concerns have materialised.

Example

Firstly, back in Feb 2020, after the weekend of storms, we were out of power for a number of days (4 -5?). To find out what was happening at that time, we had to drive up the road to get mobile reception as well as having to recharge our phone from friendly cafes, clubs and other public conveniences. Not ideal, but we managed with some effort.

The advent of Covid created a much direr situation and stress especially as my husband and I are in our 70s.

It is already enough of a worry when we have power outages, the fact that food in freezer could be spoiled as well as having no access to water (we have tank water and need pump for all water requirements, including sewerage). However, this worry escalated incredibly. We, as all Australians now, rely on the NBN and our telecommunication service providers as our lifeline and links to the outside world. I had been ordering groceries online for the first time, because of Covid lockdown, keeping abreast of what was happening outside and what as individuals we needed to do. More importantly, we were keeping in contact with our family. Again, those with reliable phone/internet service can resort to their mobiles as an alternative method of communication in the event of an outage, WE DO NOT HAVE THIS FACILITY!!!

Example

The failure of our telecommunications services was unfortunately demonstrated again at the beginning of May 2020 when our internet stopped working.

I spent the entire week (1 May to 7 May) driving up the road with my mobile (and charger as many calls took so long that the charge was depleted) calling Telstra and trying to get someone to fix the problem. I have kept a running log of the various information and reference numbers I was given and it was incredibly frustrating overall with the usual NBN/Telstra finger-pointing. It was found to be a Telstra fault in the end.

Again because of Covid, whilst we were told to stay at home, I had to spend much of it parked by the side of the road where I had mobile reception, for that week, trying to get the internet problem fixed, order my online groceries and reassure family that we were OK as they could not contact us at home.

Nothing has changed in 2021.

If the power is out, it still means that we are cut off from communication with anyone as no NBN/landline and no mobile reception.

If the internet is not working (& so far all the outages have been Telstra/NBN not our fault) then again we have no NBN/landline and no mobile reception.

Example

On rare occasions the mobile works, but I can never be sure when this will be the case so always have to specify with call-backs that they need to ring my landline first as I might not have a signal. Several times I have received a text up to 24 hours after it's been sent, or as I drive up the road and get reception.

Example

Of particular concern recently is that more and more organisations will only use a text message to send verification codes when I am trying to use my computer for banking or other IT or business related processes. It has taken me hours on many occasions to finalise a transaction as I either do not receive the code or the transaction times out before the code eventually arrives.

Example

A prime example of our issues for these delayed texts is that when I had a Covid test earlier this year, the process of filling in personal details only takes mobile numbers for notification of results. I actually received my results from my doctor who rang me on my landline - I received the text from the pathology lab hours after the conversation with the doctor. Would this be the same for contact tracers in case we were in a situation of being a "close" contact? And what if there had been either a power or NBN outage?

Example

We have had three major emergencies (along with the rest of NSW) over the last three years, the bushfires (not impacted fortunately but we live towards the end of a no-through road), Covid-19 and a number of extreme rains & floods situations. Similarly, if we were to have a medical emergency when the power was out we would not be able to call for help without either my husband or I having to leave one of us alone while the other had to drive out in order to get a mobile signal. The importance of having communication with those who are able to assist us in an emergency, should we need it, is our right. I cannot understand how we can live 80kms from Sydney and have a telecommunications system that fails us so badly!

We are not the only ones in this situation in our valleys and it is incredibly depressing and distressing that numerous concerns raised by myself and others in similar situations over the years have resulted in no action to address the problems and acknowledgement of our concerns.

When we experience an internet "outage" there is the added issue that neither of our service providers take responsibility or accountability. The onus is on the consumer, us, to prove that it is not our fault. When this is established, it is always the fault of the "other" service provider. I don't know who currently "owns" this situation - there is NBN Co and our service provider is Telstra (being the one with the strongest signal in our area). Neither is going to do anything unless pressure is brought on them from a higher authority than us. We need to have assurance that in the event of a power outage we are still able to maintain contact with essential services and are not completely isolated.

I have not even mentioned the pathetic speeds at which our internet stumbles along - we are just thankful that it works in some capacity. However, it would be a bonus if not only was the lack of adequate mobile reception in our area addressed, but we also had the luxury of internet speed that most urban areas take for granted. Whilst both my husband and I are retired, those in our valley, who have been working from home for much of the time since the pandemic, must be significantly impacted by this.

We ask that you seriously consider our circumstances. What most Australians take for granted - the ability to connect with life's essentials with confidence that their telecommunication services will not fail them - is not a reality for us. We suffer the lack of reliability of these same services and are placed in situations of stress, uncertainty and even danger which has not only been highlighted but worsened by the pandemic!

Thank you!