

**Submission for Regional Telecommunications Review 2021.**

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I am making this submission to the Regional Telecommunications Review 2021.

My submission is 4 pages in total, including this page.

We are farmers from Stradbroke in Gippsland and we would like to make a submission to the Regional Telecommunication's Review 2021.

My husband and I moved to Stradbroke over 15 years ago from Melbourne. We decided to make a lifestyle change from the hustle and bustle of city life, to a relaxed and calming way of life on a small cattle farm. When we made the decision to move from Melbourne to Gippsland, we knew we would be more disadvantaged as rural regions have higher fuel prices, inferior medical services, inferior mobile phone and internet coverage, no council general rubbish collections on dirt roads and the general poor conditions of rural roads. Yet, all these negatives did not deter us as we thought the lifestyle was worth more to us.

For nearly all people who live in rural areas, having reliable phone and internet services are an essential way of life. Unfortunately over the past 6 years, our landline and mobile services have deteriorated considerably, to the point where we question if a landline is worth having, considering the poor quality of the phone line. The answer is yes, because we also have very poor mobile reception in our house and on our property. Whenever we have a power outage, we lose our landline for at least 2 weeks as I understand that the Stradbroke exchange is a satellite exchange, and if there is an outage at the exchange, it usually takes a week before a technician can travel to the exchange, then there is additional time to repair the fault. All the while we are dealing with Telstra, which is frustrating to say the least. The last few times we have had landline outages, I have had to resort to contacting our local Federal Member, Darren Chester, to ask for assistance in contacting Telstra. I have often had to drive to the nearest town where we have reliable mobile reception to ring Telstra to lodge a fault which is totally unacceptable in my view.

As we have always had poor mobile reception, about 3 years ago, we felt it necessary to purchase a Yagi Antenna and an internal Smart Antenna from Telstra, at considerable cost to us, to provide us with better mobile phone coverage inside the house. The installer pointed the antenna to the Stradbroke Mobile Tower, which is about 8km from our home, and we did receive better mobile phone coverage.

About 2 years ago, we experienced mobile reception issues and through the help of our local Federal Member, it was discovered that the signal strength was poor because they installed a new Mobile Tower in Carrajung, which is about 45km away, but it was on top of a mountain, so it was much higher than the Stradbroke tower, which is located at the bottom of a gully, therefore our Yagi Antenna was picking up the signal from Carrajung, instead of Stradbroke, which was resulting in the poor signal strength. The Telstra technician then redirected our antenna to the Seaspray Mobile Tower, which is about 14km in a different direction.

This worked well, until there were holiday periods or long weekends, when visitors would come to Seaspray to enjoy the beach, pre Covid of course. For the duration of the Summer holidays and long weekends, we would suffer with poor phone and internet signals, obviously because of the limitations of the Seaspray Tower to deal with the additional people. However, once the holidays were over, our reception would return to normal.

However, for all of 2021, the phone and mobile reception has remained poor, only this time we have not been able to say it is because of the influx of people, as it has been like that all year, even when lockdowns have occurred and there have been no holiday makers in town. The areas of Stradbroke and Seaspray are mainly farms and there has been no significant residential building going on in the area, which may have contributed to the reduction in reliable service. Since August 2021, the coverage inside our house is poor, and even though we have a working Antenna, making phone calls is getting so much harder, and internet speeds are sometimes as low as .05kbps download. It is so frustrating that we have paid considerable money for this 4g Antenna, that it is slowly been less and less usable.

It is not only inside our house where coverage is poor, it is now common to have SOS only in our paddocks, when before we could get 1 or 2 bars of service. This is particularly concerning if we are working in a paddock and need urgent assistance from someone, as we can't contact them with service only being SOS.

Also, as you drive into Sale on the Seaspray Road, the service on this road is SOS only in some spots that never used to be like that. Sale is only 20km from us, so it is not as if we live in a totally remote area of Gippsland. It used to have reliable service where you were confident that you could make a call without it dropping out. This has not been the case for the past 12 months. So once again, something has changed with the service coverage in this area.

The lack of affordable data with the Satellite internet options makes it hard to keep up with the modern world when most businesses and Government Agencies have now switched to online models, forcing users to complete essential activities through technology thus placing an increased demand on home networks and reliable internet. This issue is now further compounded with the hindrance of COVID-19 and remote working now becoming the new norm. Video calls and daily activities quickly consumes the small data allowance offered by internet service providers, if they can be accessible at all given the high latency and low internet speeds seen with Satellite connectivity. I find Satellite internet is so expensive and to me the off peak data is a waste, as we rarely use it.

I would like to see some changes to Rural and Regional Telecommunications and they are:

1. A Rural and Regional hotline to be set up within Telstra, where the Telstra representative, deals only with Rural and Regional customers, and understands that we don't often have working mobile phones, when placing fault calls or trying to resolve landline or internet issues.
2. I would like to see an upgrade of the Stradbroke / Seaspray mobile phone towers so they can become useful towers as they once were, providing reliable mobile phone reception and internet and to improve the ever increasing areas in those local areas where service can no longer be utilised. I would also like these towers upgraded so that they are equipped to deal with increased holiday makers coming to visit the area. Whether this can be achieved by upgrading the existing mobile towers, or installing new towers along the Seaspray Road to provide us rural customers with a basic essential service.
3. For those people who have purchased Smart Antenna's, I think they should receive a rebate of some description when the local mobile towers are upgraded and their hardware also needs to be updated. This is particularly for those users who have a 3g Smart Antenna who will need to upgrade to a 4g Smart Antenna when the 3g network is decommissioned.

The importance of a reliable mobile service is paramount, especially as we live in a Bushfire zone which could impact on our already dysfunctional landline. Access to a quality mobile network, is not only crucial as a standard part of living, but it is also from a safety standpoint. The inferior service that is currently provided does not provide residents with confidence that in a time of need, they will be able to make that essential call.

Thank you  
Jeanette and Greg Gamble.