

Submission to the Regional Telecommunications Review 2021

Brett Mason

I am writing this submission as:

- a resident of the Bunya Mountains, Qld community
- a member of the Bunya Mountains Community Association Inc. (a group of residents and property owners in the Bunya Mountains area)
- Deputy Liaison Officer, Bunya Mountains Disaster Management Sub Group (a group formed to manage and prepare for disasters in the local area. Members include local councils, Qld Fire & Emergency, Police, Qld National Parks Service and the Bunya Mountains Community Association Inc.)

About our community:

The Bunya Mountains has a permanent population of less than 200 however as a major tourist area for the region, with several campsites and over 160 accommodation houses available, the visitor numbers are regularly up to 1000 people staying overnight with several hundred day visitors. This means that the local infrastructure must support a relatively large number of people at any one time even though the permanent population is quite low.

Disaster Planning & Telecommunications

In terms of disaster planning, there are several major hazards for the Bunya Mountains. As a mountain community, there are only three access routes - these are subject to closure in case of storm events (downed trees or flooded creeks), bushfires or road accidents. While the area features remnant rainforest, climate change is leading to increased risk of bushfire. The large number of visitors enjoying bushwalks and the mountain bike trails (currently under construction) mean that accidents, injuries and health issues can require ambulance attendance. The local Disaster Management Sub Group has identified that telecommunication issues are a major issue when planning for disasters, in managing such disasters and in responding to medical emergencies.

Currently, mobile telecommunications are very patchy in the Bunya Mountains area. All three major networks (Telstra, Optus and Vodafone) have mobile towers however, due to the mountainous terrain and other factors, the signal cannot be relied upon. At times of high tourist numbers, the towers can become overloaded making downloads extremely slow, even if a signal can be found. NBN internet access is available only via the NBN Satellite network.

For disaster planning, the association has attempted to find out the number of visitors through data on connections to the local towers. Telstra advised that many visitors and locals are actually connecting to towers "off the mountain" making it difficult to broadcast emergency warnings and alerts as we cannot guarantee we will be able to connect with all visitors. Where some are connected to towers as far away as Kingaroy (approx. 60 km) makes emergency management anything but straight forward.

Many of the more than 160 houses rented to visitors do not have landline telephone or internet access so most visitors rely on their mobile phones for communication. In case of emergency, there is no guarantee that all people on the mountain could be contacted and alerted of any danger. This

is a major problem for the community. Our association has come up with a workaround that relies on spreading alerts by assigning a core group of residents a list of other residents to be called. This is obviously not ideal as it can be time consuming and does not guarantee all people on the mountain are contacted and alerted.

Connectivity in the Bunya Mountains

The Covid-19 pandemic has shown the importance of being able to be connected to the online world so that everyone can work remotely, live remotely or simply keep up with the latest information which can be extremely important.

Everyone (visitors, residents, workers) could benefit from improved communications in the Bunya Mountains area. While residents can take advantage of NBN access via the Skymuster satellite, this option is not available for visitors or short-term/ part time residents. These people tend to rely on mobile 4G access for their internet access and this is not guaranteed everywhere in the area. Working or learning remotely for visitors can be very difficult without reliable, accessible internet access.

Summary

The Bunya Mountains is not unique in Australia – many holiday destinations (whether in the outback, rural or in coastal locations) suffer the same issues with a large influx of visitors and a relatively small permanent population. This suggests that a flexible service model to provide the same standard of telecommunications services that cities enjoy should be feasible. It would require that many of these communities are surveyed and visited so that a suitable model could be designed and then rolled out around Australia. This would result in economies of scale and efficiency in adoption of the plan.

Responses to the suggested review questions:

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?

As a part of regional Australia, the Bunya Mountains community does not have the same level and quality of telecommunications as those in the cities. For example, mobile coverage is very patchy and cannot be relied upon. Even with a good signal, download speeds are low, especially during periods with high visitor levels. This means that businesses and those in the community cannot rely on internet access to support remote working or learning to the extent that is expected in 2021. As connectivity needs grow (especially as the Internet of Things increases its rollout) the current infrastructure will delay progress in the take up of new technology. If Australia is to decentralise and spread the population pressure outside cities, it's essential that all Australians have access to the same standards of telecommunications services.

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

For the Bunya Mountains community, demand is expected to increase for telecommunications in line with the non-regional communities. Planning needs to allow for such increased demand while addressing the problems of access currently experienced.

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

Rural areas such as the Bunya Mts (deemed to be the jewel in the crown for tourism in the LGA's of South Burnett, Western Downs and Toowoomba) are not equally treated because of low population numbers in terms of census data with no consideration given to the transient population. This makes life especially difficult here in the Bunya Mountains for local full time and part time residents when every campsite is full and every rental house booked, locals cannot get access to telecommunications services because of low supply and high demand. It is difficult to conduct business meetings and conferences and for professionals to holiday or live here part time because of this poor access.

How to improve: the policy needs to be that every Australian person and community has equal access to modern internet and telephone services.

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

Our local community association has organised mobile signal boosters and satellite phone backup at the local Rural Fire Service shed that must also act as Incident Control Centre so that we can withstand outages in local telecommunications.

The Government could roll out a program ensuring that all communities have an equivalent backup plan in place. Special consideration needs to be given to areas where Disaster Management Incident Control Centres and Evacuation Centres are located, especially in rural and some regional areas that are isolated geographically or can be easily isolated by flooding or road damage and closures resulting in extended periods before emergency services are available to assist. Adequate, functional and reliable telecommunications could be the difference between life and death in many situations.

5. How might such impacts be addressed to ensure greater reliability? How can the network resilience be addressed in regional areas?

Ensuring each community has a disaster resilience plan and resources in place to ensure telecommunications services are available.

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?

During the Covid-19 pandemic, after the initial lockdowns, the visitor numbers to the Bunya Mountains exploded leading to vastly increased demand for telecommunications. This has led to degraded performance of the mobile networks in particular as more and more people require

access. Planning needs to account for more remote learning and working as these activities will continue even after the pandemic is over with an increasing trend to leave city life and live in rural and regional areas.

7. What can be done to improve the access and affordability of telecommunications services in regional, rural and remote Indigenous communities?

Improved coordination amongst the various service providers should be encouraged to provide better coverage and service. It may be better to have a single mobile tower with better coverage that is shared amongst networks.

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

Providing the telecommunications infrastructure of the future will enable those in rural and regional Australia to continue living and working remotely allowing more people to move to or remain in the regions. As the Internet of Things becomes more and more a part of everyday life, improved telecommunications will make life and work in regional areas more efficient and safer.

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?

Our local community association organised visits from Telstra engineers who were able to advise ways in which the current infrastructure could be better accessed through improvements in antennas and other technologies. Many of these improvements were relatively inexpensive and resulted in much improved performance. This sort of service should be made available and promoted to communities with poor access in order to assist them to improve their access. A small investment may lead to better outcomes without expensive upgrades to equipment. Many communities would not realise this service is available. Network providers need to be more accountable for ensuring access is optimised. An independent service would be able to recommend the optimal service provider as well as how to optimise service reception.

10. To what extent will new technologies enable significant change to the delivery of telecommunications services in regional Australia over the next 5-10 years? Are there any barriers to accessing these technologies?

Many regional communities may not be aware of the availability of new technology and may believe it is not affordable. Promotional campaigns will be required to educate regional communities of improvements in both technology and pricing.

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

Innovation business grants, incentives and subsidies are offered to providers to explore and develop new infrastructure/ service delivery options and to ensure the provider developments and investments are profitable despite a low base client payment for service.

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

It would really help if a consultative panel comprising representatives from each of the areas mentioned above, travelled broadly to small rural and regional communities, including indigenous communities, and actually listened, catalogued the issues raised and then undertook to develop an action plan which the Federal Government was committed to implementing.

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

At this point in time, telcos are not interested providing services for which they cannot be guaranteed a viable return, so the smaller regional, rural and remote areas do not get access to the same level of service (or no service) as compared to their city counterparts. This discrepancy must be taken into account when allocating funding for telcos for service improvement and delivery projects.

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?

As indicated above, unless consumers know what options are available, how can they make an informed choice (that is, if they have a choice!)? Rather than telcos doing the hard sell on TV ads (and targeting the vulnerable with expensive mobile plans they cannot pay), a significant effort needs to be made by the federal government to make the information available to all, in a format that all can access and utilise.

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?

It is totally inadequate and again offered by telcos trying to attract customers...it needs to be supplied by government (in honest and straight forward language) and if the promised service is not available, then government needs to ensure the issue is addressed.

16. What other matters should the Committee consider in its review and why are they important?