RE: Regional Telecommunications Review.

This submission is being made by the **Softwoods Working Group** (SWG) which is a joint timber industry & community body that has been in existence since 1987 and serves the interests of the SW Slopes (SWS) region of NSW. The SW Slopes region contains the largest area of softwood plantations in the State of NSW (approx. **125,000ha** of both public & private land) and is the second largest softwood plantation estate in Australia. Current members of SWG include senior representatives from:

- The major forest growers – **NSW Forestry Corporation** and **Hume Forests** (part of the GFP Group) with **Hancock Victorian Plantations** (private grower in NE Victoria) being observer participants.
- The product manufacturers (timber processors) – **AKD** (sawn timber products), **Visy Industries** (packaging materials including cardboard and liner board), and **Hyne** (sawn timber products).
- **Local Government** (Snowy Valleys Council, Greater Hume Council, Cootamundra-Gundagai Regional Council, and Albury City)
- **Regional Development Australia** committees for Murray and Riverina
- Various relevant **NSW State Government agencies** (Department of Regional NSW, and Transport for NSW)
- The **Forest Industry Council** (FIC), which represents the operational, training and safety issues for the industry workforce, with particular regard to harvest and haulage contractors.

The SWG is widely regarded as a unique and effective forum that examines strategic issues and prepares plans to focus on regional community development based on the local plantation industry.

To put the SWS softwoods industry into some context, the socio-economic benefits of the industry on our region, just prior to the 2019-20 fires are:
- *It is the most significant economic driver in the region, supporting $1.2 billion in Gross Regional Product (value-added)*
- *Total employment (direct & indirect) approx. 7,000 people*
- *Annual total contribution to local economic activity is $2.6 billion per annum.*
- *Contribution to household income is $560 million per annum.*

The fire impacts have certainly had a serious adverse impact on the future availability of timber products for at least the next 20 years.

However, it is important to note that even with this reduced availability of wood products, the plantation sector is STILL the most significant socio-economic contributor to the region.

The following comments are made in relation to the softwoods plantations in the South West Slopes Region of NSW and in the context of the key questions asked by the Review.

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?*
    There are many areas in regional Australia that don't necessarily have high population densities but certainly support high value crops or resources in geographical areas that are not covered for even the most basic of services such as mobile phone coverage. This includes large tracts of the plantation land described above.
    Consequently the co-ordination of routine day to day management activities are compromised and in times of crisis, such as bushfires, the risks to people and resources are profound.
    Most of the machinery used for the harvesting and haulage of forest products features the latest world-class technology. Due to the constraints in the communication network, the data transfer components of that technology are not useable because of the geographic location of the harvesting operations.

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

3. *How have the Government's policies and programs affected telecommunications service outcomes in regional, rural and remote Australia? How can these be improved?*
    It appears that population density is the driving force behind the provision of services to remote rural areas. Other measures such as the value of the resource/s being managed & provided need to receive greater consideration in determining the provision of 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?*
   The 2019-20 bushfires in our region provided numerous examples of the impacts associated with the loss of communication networks. These impacts included massive economic losses together with the isolation of entire towns and communities for long periods of time.
   Numerous enquiries and a Royal Commission have addressed this issue and can provide you with useful & relevant data and anecdotes.

5. *How might such impacts be addressed to ensure greater reliability? How can the network resilience be addressed in regional areas?*
   Some examples include:
   a. Better initial coverage
   b. Greater access & availability of back-up resources

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?

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

8. *How can investment in telecommunications infrastructure work with other programs and policies to encourage economic development in regional Australia?*
   a. More consultation & involvement with local communities

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?

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?*
    The largest barriers to accessing the technologies is the actual access in more remote localities. No doubt costs would be a huge factor as well, however, adopting a 'build it and they will come' approach might sound a bit cliché, however it generally holds when it comes to provision of essential infrastructure

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

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

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

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?

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?*
Perhaps some examples of what the services actually provide would e helpful (eg. can the improvements support voice only or data only? Use of worked examples of the sorts of activities that can be used in a specific area/geographical location.

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

We would be happy to discuss any of these issues personally as required.

Yours sincerely,

Phil Clements
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