



# SUSAN TEMPLEMAN MP

FEDERAL MEMBER FOR MACQUARIE

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Dear Mr Hartsuyker

Thank you for the invitation to make a submission to the 2021 Regional Telecommunications Review

I welcome the Review's interest in peri-urban telecommunication issues. My electorate covers the Hawkesbury and Blue Mountains local government area on the western edge of metropolitan Sydney.

## Overview

Since first being elected in 2016 as the Member for Macquarie, the need for improved telecommunications has featured as a constant issue in the electorate. I've spoken about these matters, in Parliament, and in the media many, many times about the appalling mobile reception in our communities and how dangerous this is for us given how prone to flood and fire we are.

This document will address three issues: mobile coverage, NBN rollout, legacy network and disaster resilience.

## Mobile coverage

While the Federal Government provides a regulatory framework, the provision of mobile networks is a commercial matter for the private mobile network providers.

The Federal Government introduced the Mobile Blackspots Program (MBSP) following the 2013 election. This program has seen a number of mobile base stations constructed to improve coverage in the Hawkesbury local government area.

At various times in the intervening 8 years, the Federal Government has invited stakeholders, including Council, and the wider public to suggest mobile blackspot locations. As Federal Member I've publicised these opportunities, urged my Councils to provide input, identified locations for new towers and reminded the Minister about past commitments made and delays endured.

MBSB Round 1 saw sites in the Hawkesbury at Colo Heights, Kurrajong and Webbs Creek announced and constructed. It also announced Mount Tomah (Blue Mountains area) which would have improved Bells Line of Road connectivity but was not proceeded with and funding was transferred some years later to the Central West.

Round 2 was announced in early 2016. St Albans was promised but is still not constructed.

Round 3 is known as the Priority Round also announced in 2016 and the only tower committed to and built in the Hawkesbury was at Grose Vale. Sites in the Blue Mountains were at Megalong Valley which became operation in 2020 and Yellow Rock which is expected to be operational soon. Again, all sites have taken a long time from announcement to being operational.

As part of Round 4, in September 2018, the Federal Government opened the National Mobile Blackspot Database for nominations. This round was to target Public Interest Premises including economic centres, emergency service facilities, health facilities, educational facilities, Indigenous community organisations, local government facilities, and not-for-profit organisations.

I publicised this round, spoke in Parliament, invited feedback from residents and nominated a spreadsheet of sites across the electorate which was submitted to the then Department of Communication and the Arts. Only two sites were subsequently awarded in my electorate both in the Hawkesbury - Macdonald Valley Public School and Upper Colo.

Under Round 5, the Federal Government only awarded sites at Central Colo, Colo and Putty - all located in the Hawkesbury

Councils and the public were also invited to nominate sites for Round 5A. I publicised Round 5A inviting residents to nominate sites. The information I received was collated into a map and provided to the Minister and the mobile network providers on 11 February 2021. The only blackspot site to subsequently receive funding in Round 5A was in the Hawkesbury at Lower Macdonald.

No details are available yet for the \$80 million Round 6.

The Mobile Blackspot program has excluded parts of the Blue Mountains such as Hawkesbury Heights, Winmalee, East Blaxland and Mount Riverview and in the Hawkesbury suburbs like Windsor Downs, Oakville and Maraylya. I have advocated strongly for peri-urban parts of my electorate to be included in programs to improve coverage. The Federal Government recently announced the Peri-Urban Mobile Program <https://www.communications.gov.au/what-we-do/phone/mobile-services-and-coverage/peri-urban-mobile-program> but has yet to open the program for applications.

### **NBN rollout**

Richmond and Windsor were fortunate to access Fibre to the Premise (FTTP) under the initial NBN rollout in August 2013.

The change of government in September 2013 led to other areas of the Hawkesbury designated as Fibre to the Node (FTTN), Fixed Wireless and satellite. In the Blue Mountains FTTN was rolled out from Lawson to Mount Victoria. Remote areas like Megalong Valley, Mount Wilson, Mount Tomah and Bell were assigned Satellite. As the flaws of FTTN became evident, another technology - Fibre to the Curb (FTTC) - was deployed to FTTN areas not yet built and extended into some Fixed Wireless designated areas.

Luckily for some Hakesbury residents NBNSCo was unable to secure sites for many Fixed Wireless towers and, consequently, it extended the fixed line footprint. I've spoken many times in Parliament and in the media about the NBN rollout in the Hawkesbury where, standing on one street corner in some areas you could have 3 or 4 NBN technologies connecting neighbouring houses.

In the Blue Mountains FTTC has now been rolled out from Lapstone to Hazelbrook.

Last year, when thunderstorm season began, my office was inundated with complaints about FTTC boxes failing. This was particularly acute in the FTTC area of the Blue Mountains and Bowen Mountain and Windsor Downs in the Hawkesbury. Many people lost NBN services when lightning caused surges and damaged the NBN boxes. There was a reluctance by NBNSCo to acknowledge the extent of the problem, but investigations were undertaken. With 10,000 boxes taken out during the summer of storms across my electorate, NBNSCo responded to the public exposure of the flawed boxes, conceding there was a problem and posted this consumer advice on its website <https://www.nbnco.com.au/utility/lightning-strikes-and-damage-to-nbn-equipment>

The remaining issues with NBN connectivity are in the Fixed Wireless areas where signal strength is poor and in fixed line areas where the fixed line stops before the end of a road relegating those residents to the satellite. Rural areas remain dependent on NBN satellite as service providers withdraw ADSL broadband from the old copper network.

It is important to recognise that satellite and Fixed Wireless do not, and cannot, provide the fast speeds and capacity that many households need to support working from home, schooling from home and streaming services. These people are left paying for an inferior service compared to a fixed line service. They deserve better.

## **1. Legacy network and disaster resilience**

The Blue Mountains and Hawkesbury are well known for being disaster-prone, whether bushfires, storms or floods. Historically its electricity network and copper telephone network are frail. The rural areas of the Hawkesbury still have a legacy copper network that many people are reluctant to give up for NBN satellite services. These areas also have poorer mobile reception. Some communities like Bilpin and St Albans have been wanting better and more resilient services for many years.

In relation to St Albans, I continue to advocate that Telstra repair and maintain its copper network and that Optus deliver the blackspot project it was awarded five years ago.

In relation to Bilpin, reliable power supply for the Bilpin exchange and mobile tower is vital. This has been an issue the community engaged in with me well before the 2019 bushfires and since. Telstra has taken steps to upgrade the reliability of the batteries but to date has not agreed to install a generator.

There were many issues with the Telstra copper network from storms and bushfires in 2019 and 2020 and the floods of 2021. My staff and I were in constant contact with Telstra to repair and restore the network. It is fair to say that the 2019-20 bushfires were a wake-up call to telecommunication network providers to lift the resilience of their networks and harden their infrastructure.

I was pleased that, at my request, Telstra staff visited the Hawkesbury after the bushfires in March 2020 just prior to the first Covid lockdown and spent a day each at Bilpin, Colo and St Albans where they took resident complaints and gained a better understanding of the telecommunication issues facing rural and isolated communities. That on-the-ground experience for Telstra staff contributed to the nomination and awarding of Round 5 blackspot spots to Telstra at Central Colo and Colo. Optus was successful in gaining the site at Putty.

In response to the bushfires and the Royal Commission the Federal Government introduced the Strengthening Telecommunications Against Natural Disasters (STAND) <https://www.communications.gov.au/what-we-do/phone/communications-emergencies/what-government-doing-strengthen-telecommunications-resilience> and applications for Round 2 closed on 26 August 2021. I'm not privy to what, if any, applications have been made for my electorate.

## **Conclusion**

There are multiple issues to be resolved before the blue Mountains and Hawkesbury have adequately robust and reliable telecommunications.

There have been promises made over the last 8 years by numerous Liberal Governments that have not been delivered.

The need is urgent, and it is not too dramatic to say that lives depend on it.

The years of neglect cannot be turned around overnight.

Yours sincerely



**Susan Templeman MP**  
**Member for Macquarie**  
30 September 2020