Natalie Bennett

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18th September 2021

2021 Regional Telecommunications Review Secretariat
Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Communications
GPO Box 594
CANBERRA ACT 2601

Dear Sir/Madam,

RE: REGIONAL TELECOMMUNICATIONS REVIEW

I am writing as a regional resident of New South Wales, as someone who provides technical support for telehealth across the two largest Local Health Districts in NSW, a Rural Fire Service volunteer, and secretary of my local Progress Association.

Copper Line-Based Telecommunications

I think one of the biggest failures of the Australian Government in this time, has been the failure to replace the existing copper lines with optic fibre or whatever wired medium, and this includes in large towns and cities.

Wireless internet is not available outside of towns, but Telstra is closing off wired services without providing an alternative, leaving each individual household and business to find their own solutions, and these are both expensive and provide little comparable services.

The cost of replacing all of these wired services is obviously the reason why Telstra has not undertaken this task. However it is the only solution for most of regional NSW. However Telstra has also failed to provide wireless solutions as well.

Whilst we have appealed to Telstra to install a tower in a strategic location to service the village for both phone and data, this has not happened. But we are also aware that this will only help a small number of people within proximity of a tower. A new subdivision is approved across the road for more rural residences, but they will each have to find their own solutions as there is no wireless or wired service to those lots.

And really: we are only one area. There are hundreds, if not thousands of other communities around Australia in the same position.

Internet: My community has a heavy mix of copper-line ADSL, satellite internet, and private home aerials for wireless internet.

Telephone: My community has the same mix of copper-line landlines and mobile phone reception which is unreliable. My landline gets so many spam calls, and my mobile phone only works at one windowsill.

For this service, Telstra has increased the smallest plan

*from $59 per month a few years ago for 50 GB and free local calls – calls to mobile or STD were extra

* to $75 for 250 GB and free local calls – calls to mobile or STD were extra

* one day they wrote to say they had increased my data allowance to 500GB and now unlimited mobile and STD calls

* and last month they increased it again to $80 without even letting me know.

This is to provide ADSL internet to a single household, and while they boosted my allowance to a huge 500GB data allowance this was a white elephant since I can barely use 1GB a day trying my best.

In my area, a large number of residents all reached an age around 5 years ago and sold up, and as part of that, their landlines were disconnected. In the past, that meant the new owner came in and asked for a connection, but were told copper lines were no longer available. Telstra will say that there are no connections left on the Mullion Creek exchange, and no alternative options are provided.

My neighbour's on both sides are in this position. They bought about 5 years ago and neither can get a wired service. Neither can get mobile phone or mobile data reception. One has put an Optus aerial on his roof for mobile data but it is still unable to support their needs, since he works from home and they are home schooling through the COVID lockdowns.

Another village family has been driving to a carpark across the road from the school during lockdown to try to get internet access through mobile. This was so that their children could connect to the school network while the schools were locked down. They only live 200m down the road but can't get any mobile phone reception or mobile data. Like me, they can make mobile calls at a windowsill if they don't move.

TELSTRA TOWER

We have appealed on many occasions to Telstra to get a tower in the Mullion Creek area. We could look to alternative providers such as Optus, but unfortunately then our phones will have poor coverage when we go to other areas which can only get Telstra reception.

For example, I spend one day a week working on a farm on the eastern side of Euchareena, about 30mins north of Mullion Creek. The only coverage out there is with Telstra.

We recently started a petition to Telstra, and their reply was to make a submission to the Black Spot Program, however I did so years ago, as did many others, and nothing has ever happened. There are many black-spots for mobile reception out this way, and the entire village has very poor reception.

https://www.change.org/p/telstra-mullion-creek-we-need-a-mobile-tower-now

Within hours, the petition had hundreds who signed and on the Facebook posts, so many stories were shared about issues in this area. To date, the petition has 499 signatures. That might not sound like much, but given a lot of residents in this area don't have Facebook, this is huge! I have copied people's comments from several Facebook pages which provide good examples of their issues and experiences.

https://www.centralwesterndaily.com.au/story/7393026/towns-call-for-better-mobile-service-so-it-isnt-left-behind/
https://www.facebook.com/MichaelMcCormackMP/posts/390846819078230
https://www.facebook.com/PRIME7NewsCentralWest/videos/1731477907061443/

Telehealth, home schooling, working from home

I am employed by both Far West and Western NSW Local Health Districts to provide IT Telehealth Support. A large part of my job involves helping people at home with connecting to video calls for remote health support.

A few years ago, the community nurses in our health districts started going out to patient's homes with technology to make video calls back to doctors and specialists. They initially started with USB Telstra dongles called AirCards, which used mobile data to connect to the internet.

The problem was – these rely on good mobile data availability.   Even if there is some mobile data reception, as soon as you go indoors, the reception deteriorates. As we replaced the Aircards with iPhones, we now have our community nurses hotspotting their mobile data from their iPhones to get internet on their laptops. Others are just using the camera/mic on the iPhone and video calling from that.

Sometimes we ask patients if they have home wifi we can connect to for a better reception, but so few do, and many are on satellite internet with such a small data allowance that video calling will eat into their monthly allowance.

Since the Coronavirus has hit, the issues have been highlighted perfectly. I only live 25kms from a major regional town, but my home internet cannot support me working from home. There are no impediments between my house and Orange: there is a flat, clear line of sight. But as mentioned earlier, I have one windowsill where I get mobile phone reception. I can sent an MMS if I sit the phone on the windowsill for 5 minutes. Recently these stopped working as well, but are back again.

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My ADSL line has failed several times, and the reduced number of Telstra technicians means that I must wait weeks for a repair. Telstra has offered to "send me a mobile phone" to use in the meantime to replace the phone and internet reception, but they do not understand that is an unusable alternative, and I already have a mobile phone.

My line was repaired last year. I am still waiting for them to return and fix it properly, as the line needs to be buried below ground and their safety rail is still in my lawn. They admitted that I might never see them again, since jobs are prioritised and Telstra closes the job once the line is restored.

But back to the Telehealth. Since the Coronavirus has arrived, our health clinicians have been virtualising their services where possible. Our health facilities which include Aged Care in the Multipurpose Services (MPS's) have been locked down and so no visitors have been allowed.

We rely on Visiting Medical Officers (VMOs) to fly in from major cities to provide services to many of our facilities, but they have been unable to travel. We have started the vCare Service – which oversees resuscitation rooms and flow of acutely ill patients around the district. We have initiated the Virtual Clinical Pharmacy Service (VCPS) and Virtual Rural Generalist Service (VRGS). So the demand for bandwidth to our facilities is under more and more pressure. The Health Wide Area Network (HWAN) is proving to be unable to cope with the demand. We have deployed iPads in bulk to enable patients and residents to link by video calling to see specialists, family and friends. But these are competing for the sites' clinical services so are also having issues connecting.

Can anything be done?

Yes. Telstra needs to be funded again to invest massively in infrastructure. Telstra should never have been privatised, even in part. As soon as you commercialised the public service, you made it prioritise profit over service quality and improvement.

Take the community of Trundle, for example. They got no service from Telstra, so Optus installed a tower in their town and Optus now has 100% of the customers. The problem is that Optus coverage is poor in regional, rural and remote areas. So those customers must have Telstra-based SIM cards for when they are not in the town.

But why should regional Australia have to fund these services? As one person commented on our Facebook posts: "Communities and councils shouldn't have to lobby or make a pitch to the telcos to construct a mobile tower in their areas. This isn't like pitching to host the Olympics this is a basic duty of care…".

Telstra has been allowed to walk away, to

* force increases in pricing on the copper-line services to a point where it is unaffordable – gradually applying pressure to home owners to invest thousands into boosters, aerials, towers, satellites – solutions that often don't work or provide an improvement;

* massively reduce their workforce so that only the bare minimum of service restoration is able to be provided, and jobs such as burying lines in conduit are unlikely to ever be done; and

* ignore the issues people report, such as the one our petition raises.

Alternative providers

We have looked into alternatives however none of these are available in our area. I contacted Wi-Sky NSW but received no reply. I contacted Zetifi but no reply.

https://regionaltechhub.org.au/get-connected/discover-internet-options/non-nbn-fixed-wireless/

Is SpaceX's Starlink the solution

This is a real possibility. When I first connected to satellite internet back in 2007, the service was already "full". The satellite companies reached their customer capacity. I applied to move to the NBN satellite service when it became available, which was absolutely no different. The same companies were providing the same service from the same group of satellites, and were also turning new applications away because they were struggling to provide the promised NBN speeds.

If the Starlink pilot proves successful in Australia, why shouldn't Telstra make a partnership with SpaceX which significantly brings down the monthly cost and subsidises the satellite installations? The current satellite installs are ground-based installs, so the roof-mounting brackets would need to be included. But Telstra would be able to say it is providing regional, rural and remote service without the massive infrastructure investment and maintenance.

Summary

I put up a petition in my local community to appeal to Telstra for a tower in Mullion Creek, and the instant and overwhelming response was indicative of the extent of the issue. But I am also aware that a tower might not be the solution for many.

We hope you can use these examples to support a damning report on the state of Regional Telecommunications in Australia.

Regards,
Natalie Bennett

17 Aug 2021, 19:35

Gday again,
Sore your post regarding mob coverage.
I spent a bit of time on this a few years ago.
I spoke to a few of the service providers and ended up writing to the minister for communications office. This was at a time when the government was promoting their black spots solutions for regional australia.
The ministers office replied with that the funding only enabled so many towers decided up between Telstra and Optus and so many towers and locations indicated by the government based on need. You may remember that all of sudden people in the Clifton grove area could get awesome Optus service all of sudden, the result of the above.
Shortening the story the round of funding I think at the time was way off and I would imagine set back a few decades by Covid debt. I was going to propose a subsidiary owned tower.
There is locations near Bathurst that do it. Basically the community funds a tower.

A sample from one Community resident – please see separate pages for comments.