Lee O'Connor, Submission to Regional Telecommunications Review

Introduction:

I am based in the Coonamble area of north west NSW. I live on and am partner in a livestock/cropping property 38km from the township and own the Coonamble Times newspaper and Western Plains App (a mobile news app for the region) which operate out of premises in the main street of Coonamble township. I am also President of our local Chamber of Commerce (approx. 80 business members).

We are heavily reliant on telecommunications technology and find it a continual challenge which sometimes creates severe and unnecessary stresses on our family. We have the Skymuster Plus satellite service and a mobile booster (purchased for $1200) at our home which connects via the Telstra tower (now 5G) in Coonamble. We cannot get mobile reception outside our home or for much of the 25minute trip to town without an antenna or booster. The Skymuster service was a vast improvement on trying to connect to the Telstra tower for wifi but now our mobile phones and internet have a significant lag when trying to participate in zoom or some phone conversations.

At the town business premises we were forced to forego our ADSL service – which was plenty fast, functional and reliable – to NBN fibre to node about two years ago. The Fibre to Node is unreliable, unpredictably intermittent or of low quality.

> 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?

Out of town we need telephone and video calling/conferencing that does not lag.

In town we need to be able to access a continuous internet and telephone service without drop outs.

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

If we are to retain and attract business and population to areas like ours, we need a reliable and efficient mobile and internet service that covers not only the towns and villages but the properties and roadways in between. We don't have it yet.

There are an increasing number of home-based, rural-based businesses in regions like ours, many are highly technology reliant. To support innovation and economic growth, see above.

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

The situation where customers are passed between their telco/service provider and the NBN has created some serious problems. Many customers fall through the cracks. At one point the whole community of Coonamble fell into a crack – requests for service were not being passed from telco to nbn to contracted repairers for a minimum two-month period due, apparently, to some glitch in the reporting system. This impacted dozens of businesses and families.

The opportunity created by the Regional Connectivity Program seems designed to provide for those who have plenty of resources rather than those areas of need where more assistance is needed. Communities in remote, low population growth areas are left to design their own solutions, pool their meagre resources to build a business case and jump through multiple administrative hoops to seek funding for a project that, if successful, they then have to self-manage. Surely there must be a model where communities with fewer skills and financial resources available can have funding and expertise provided by government to design and construct life-changing community-transforming telecommunications infrastructure.

The Mobile Blackspot Program should include a requirement where telcos who receive taxpayer funding should be made to share infrastructure like towers. The situation where Optus users have zero service in one town and Telsra users have zero service in the next town is unbelievable but is common in our region. These corporations make huge profits, the taxpayer dollars they receive should be used to benefit the maximum number of taxpayers.

The transition to the nbn in these communities was poorly handled. Many elderly residents and some small businesses lost their telephone landline permanently due to failure by nbn to properly communicate how and when the changes would happen.

The government/nbn plan to use social media as a means to educate and assist older residents to get online is ludicrous. NBN officials have voiced their frustration at the lack of online engagement by older citizens, especially in regional/remote areas. These people are barely or not at all online – putting government funding into facebook advertising to reach them to help them access online services is laughable. They read their local newspapers and listen to radio – invest in those places and support local jobs and businesses at the same time.

Reliance on local government as a key partner in initiating and implementing telecommunications projects can be counter-productive in areas where local government is already over-stretched and under-resourced.

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

Power supply and frequent outages also needs to be taken into account when planning telecommunications.

The Coonamble area has frequent power outages – when this happens we have no landline, no internet, no eftpos. Businesses cannot operate. Safety on farms is a critical factor. This happens in the normal course of life – surely the experience during the east coast bushfires should be a red flag in our changing climate.

Also, who knew that during days with heavy cloud even the Skymuster satellite service struggles to work. In what developed nation in the 21st century can you not connect to the internet on a cloudy day?!

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

For town nbn – fibre to node is clearly not sufficient. Why do country towns not warrant the same level of technology as cities?

For rural internet and mobile phone services a decentralized, decorporatised model is needed. I object to government programs which pick winners based on who has more money/resources. Surely taxpayer funds should be used to develop a fully-functioning network that covers all areas to allow communities and local economies to operate to their full potential.

> 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?

I am aware of a number of businesses, including my own, where working from home was not a viable option due to limitations or unreliability of mobile and internet services. Hopefully, this will be a priority in future planning.

I am aware of many families who do not have internet or suitable devices at home to allow home-schooling. Due to equity that meant that our local schools were not able to offer online learning during the stay at home orders. This put significant extra pressure on school staff, families and reduced learning opportunities for children, causing them to fall further behind their city counterparts.

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

I am not sure what your definition of an Indigenous community is. In our shire, Indigenous people make up close to 40% of the total population and at least 70% of the school population.

A genuine focus on improving adult literacy rates, followed by or accompanied by a focus on on-the-ground digital literacy would have far reaching effects.

I believe that the additional layer of disadvantage caused by sub-standard and/or high cost telecommunications services impacts both Indigenous and non-Indigenous community members equally. Access and affordability is a locational, economic and educational problem, not a cultural one.

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

Investment in telecommunications infrastructure in regional and remote areas should not be reserved for agricultural and mining industries only. If taxpayer dollars are expended on infrastructure to support these industries, efforts should be made to ensure shared access to the infrastructure/technology by other industry and community sectors in the regoin. We need our economy to diversify to sustain regional Australia. Our government should not be putting all our eggs in two baskets.

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?

Government policy is a key barrier to real innovation. Policies and programs that channel resources into centralised hubs, centres of excellence, special (isolated) precincts or are aimed at a specific sub-section of a region (eg. ag, indigenous) might be good for media announcements but are counterintuitive to and often preclude genuine innovation. Reliance on top tier corporations and high-level consultants is proven not to deliver much benefit here at ground level.

Programs that are based on genuine consultation involving shared problem-solving; that bring small business, real community leaders (not just council representatives) and local entrepreneurs to the table; and which encourage co-operation and collaboration between geographic regions and a variety of industry/community sectors will yield far better, far reaching results.

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?

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

Aim for investment and rollout in technologies that will provide broad geographic coverage or broad community/industry access.

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

Engagement at community level is currently very poor. Current benchmarks and processes for community consultation by government and their funded agencies allows a tick-a-box approach rather than effective engagement. Using plain English wherever possible, using community-based advertising channels rather than relying on social media campaigns and making human contact available as a means of getting involved would be a big help. Corporate/technical jargon and government-speak is a serious deterrent to particpation and is generally quite unnecessary.

There often seem to be no reality-checking of program delivery and service outcomes. Large corporations and high profile executive firms are always going to evaluate their programs very positively. If you want honest "ground-truthing" ask the end users.

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

See 3 and 9 above.

Conclusion.

Thank you for the opportunity to have input.

Lee O'Connor

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