

26th October 2021

Regional Telecommunications Independent Review Committee

secretariat@rtirc.gov.au

RE: Regional Telecommunications Review 2021

Dear Committee

My family live at [REDACTED], located 65 kilometres from Kempsey NSW on the Macleay River. We are a fourth generation farming family, producing grass fed beef for the Australian market. My husband & I both have off-farm jobs, with myself working part time in Kempsey & my husband working full time (from home) for a multi-national construction company. Our three children are aged 13, 11 & 9 years old, attending schools in Kempsey. Prior to transitioning to living full time on the farm in 2011, we researched & planned the development of our property to ensure we could set ourselves up in the position we are currently in.

While we do not have a traditional land line (as this was washed out in the 2001 flood) we do have a Next G Wireless Link service which runs off the Telstra Mobile Network. This was an additional cost to us to install of approximately \$600 & limits us to plans we have access to. For example, we must pay metered rates for calls to all mobile phones & we cannot bundle our plans to make savings across our landline & three mobile phone plans despite all being Telstra services.

We also installed a Yagi-Uda Antenna on the homestead at additional cost to us of approximately \$2,000. Yagi antennas focus the transmit and receive power in a single direction (to the nearest mobile tower) with the aim of boosting mobile reception. Without this, we would have one bar of mobile reception on 75% of our property.

We are also connected to the Satellite NBN with Skymesh on a plan for 85 GB of peak-data & 200GB of off-peak data for the monthly cost of \$94.95. While we have found the connection & speed of this service to be great, the cost of the plan is not. In the most recent lockdown with three children having to do online learning, we had no choice but to purchase extra data at an additional cost of \$480 per month just to ensure our children had access to their education. You may argue that the children could have used traditional paper packs, but we did not want our children to be disadvantaged simply by our geographical location.

The final issue I would like to raise is relating to the 2019 bushfires. On Friday 8 November 2019 we had an Emergency Warning for the Carrai Fire. We lost all power at approximately 2pm on Friday 8 November which meant that our landline & satellite NBN also went down. We then had patchy mobile reception until 11pm when the nearest Telstra tower was damaged by fire. From that point on we had no access to any telecommunications. This meant our only connection from the outside

world was via the battery operated transistor radio so we tuned into ABC Mid North Coast which was both comforting & frustrating because as the updates were being announced, we could see the conditions on the ground were different to what was being reported but we had no way of letting anyone know. After 24 hours, what soon became infuriating was the constant announcement on the radio to refer to the RFS "Fires Near Me App" or the "RFS website" which was impossible without either mobile reception or NBN internet.

We choose to live in the bush and we accept outages during conditions like these, in fact, we were amazed at the speed at which Kempsey Shire Council and Essential Energy were responding to the massive repair job in the Upper Macleay Valley. I just want to make the point that the emergency response team, particularly those responsible for reporting to the media, need to think about the people without power, phones or internet when broadcasting emergency information. Simply referring us to a website, hotline or app is not going to work.

Since the emergency has passed, I have wondered about mobile phone towers as well as the use of satellite phones. While I understand there is a business model involved for Telstra, I am left wondering why (in times of emergencies) any mobile tower is not obligated to switch to a "free for all" as far as providing mobile coverage. And further, if you can make a call to emergency services without mobile reception, why can this not be extended to any call during an emergency? In our case, we would have been able to contact the RFS to advise of the current situation, notify our local network and more importantly get in contact with our children, whom we were separated without contact for 72 hours. There must be a massive rethink of how our communications networks operate during emergency situations.

I am very happy to discuss any of the above issues further &/or provide evidence of the costs listed to help support your case. I can be contacted on the details listed below. Thank you for your consideration.

Yours sincerely

B OSULLIVAN

Bernadette O'Sullivan

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

CC: Pat Conaghan MP, Member for Cowper
PO Box 345, Palm Court Centre
Port Macquarie, NSW, 2444