

Mobile Coverage Programme Discussion Paper

Submission Cover Sheet

Submission Information

This cover sheet should be attached to submissions made to the Department of Communications in relation to the Mobile Coverage Programme Discussion Paper.

Contact Details

Name of respondent:	The Hon Darren Chester MP
Name of organisation:	Federal Member for Gippsland
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Date:	February 17, 2014

Confidentiality and privacy

All submissions and comments, or parts thereof, will be treated as non-confidential information unless specifically requested, and acceptable reasons should accompany each request. Email disclaimers will not be considered sufficient confidentiality requests.

Respondents lodging a submission should be aware that submissions (excluding any information agreed to be treated as confidential information) will be made publicly available, including on the Department of Communications' website. Submissions and comments will be subject to freedom of information provisions. Despite a submission being identified as confidential or sensitive, submissions may be disclosed where authorised or required by law, or for the purpose of parliamentary processes.

Do you want all or parts of the submission to be treated as confidential? No

If yes, identify below which parts of the submission are to be treated as confidential (and provide a reason):

If the submission contains personal information of any third party individual, indicate on this Submission Cover Sheet if that third party individual has not consented to the publication of his or her personal information:

Submission Instructions

Submissions are to be made by **5:00pm (AEST) Friday 28 February 2014**.

Where possible, submissions should be lodged electronically, preferably in Microsoft Word or other text-based formats via the email address mobilecoverage@communications.gov.au

Alternatively, submissions can be sent to the postal address below (to arrive by the due date):

The Manager
Mobile Coverage Programme
Department of Communications
GPO Box 2154
CANBERRA ACT 2615

All submissions lodged will be acknowledged by the Department of Communications by email (or by letter if no email is provided). Respondents lodging a submission who do not receive acknowledgement of their submission should contact the Department. Submissions which are not acknowledged by the Department as being received may not be considered. Respondents should be aware that emails greater than 10Mb may not be successfully delivered.

Darren Chester

Federal Member for Gippsland

February 28, 2014

The Manager
Mobile Coverage Programme
Department of Communications
GPO Box 2154
CANBERRA ACT 2615

Dear Sir/Madam

I write in my capacity as Federal Member for Gippsland to represent the views of my community in relation to the adequacy of mobile phone coverage in this electorate.

Firstly, I would like to commend the Coalition Government on its policy to improve mobile phone coverage in Australia. Many parts of the Gippsland region suffer from inadequate or non-existent coverage which poses a threat during emergency situations and places constraints on the economic and social life of the region.

I recognise that the \$100 million allocated to this program will not solve all coverage problems in regional areas and I support efforts to secure co-investment from industry and other sources.

I have raised these issues in the public domain, via media and speeches in Federal Parliament (most recently on February 27, 2014), along with making direct representations to both the previous and current Ministers for Communication.

Background

By way of background, the Gippsland electorate covers approximately 33,000 square kilometres and is one of the most diverse regions in Australia. The western edge of the electorate starts approximately 150 kilometres east of Melbourne and extends to the New South Wales border.

At a local government level it is serviced by East Gippsland Shire Council, Wellington Shire Council and Latrobe City Council.

Although most of the major population centres are located along the Princes Highway (Morwell, Traralgon, Sale, Bairnsdale, Lakes Entrance and Orbost) there are significant townships off the major route (such as Yarram, Maffra, Loch Sport, Painesville and Omeo).

There are numerous smaller townships and localities which primarily service the agricultural sector or tourism industry.

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Gippsland is blessed with many natural attractions and has a vast network of state and national parks, along with stunning beaches, lakes and river systems and productive farmland. Key industries such as power generation, oil and gas production, defence, agriculture, tourism and hospitality, general manufacturing and the service sector provide employment across the region.

Mobile phone coverage

Mobile phone coverage in Gippsland is generally good in the major townships and along the majority of the major transport routes with some notable exceptions.

Along parts of the Princes Highway and the Monaro Highway in the east of the region, the coverage is patchy or non-existent. Motorists on the South Gippsland Highway and Hyland Way (which links Yarram and Traralgon) experience similar coverage problems.

It is acknowledged that the topography of the region and its dispersed population make it difficult to provide adequate mobile phone coverage and there are literally dozens of communities and localities which have raised concerns with me over the past five years (list provided for information).

There is no prospect of the industry itself funding upgrades in some parts of Gippsland without a level of co-investment from government.

Community concerns

The primary concerns which have been raised by my community relate to the economic and social impacts of poor mobile phone coverage, along with the risk during emergency situations.

Gippsland is one of the most fire prone regions in the world and this summer we have again experienced significant outbreaks.

The region is also exposed to heavy flooding and has some of the fastest rising rivers in the southern hemisphere which demands quick and effective communication with the community at all times.

Unfortunately, some of the parts of Gippsland which are most exposed to natural disasters, have the worst mobile phone coverage and systems such as the Emergency Alert initiative are of limited value. Adding to the problem is the poor radio reception in those areas.

It is my strong view that the Federal Government's program to improve mobile phone coverage should have a focus on areas where life and property are at risk due to a lack of reception.

This would naturally extend to improving coverage on major transport routes in Gippsland such as the Princes Highway, South Gippsland Highway, Monaro Highway and Hyland Way.

Vast quantities of local produce are transported through the region and as a matter of business efficiency and community safety, it is important that mobile coverage is extended to the major routes.

A number of mobile phone black spots occur along these major roads. There have been incidents reported to my office where accidents have occurred and those attending the scene have been forced to drive many kilometres to reach a coverage area and contact emergency services, adding to the risk of death or serious injuries.

As mentioned previously, tourism is a major and expanding industry in Gippsland. Visitors to regional communities expect to have mobile coverage and the industry fears that it will have a competitive disadvantage in the future if Gippsland can't offer a basic level of service.

Given the increased awareness of bushfire safety in the wake of Black Saturday, there is a widely held concern that visitors will avoid holidaying in localities where they won't have access to a mobile phone based early warning system.

In recent years, the increased use of devices such as ipads and iphones has added to problems in holiday locations as periods of peak demand effectively shut down access to the network.

From a business perspective, I am regularly advised by Gippslanders of the extremes they often go to when using their mobile phones. Generally, this involves driving a few kilometres from their homes to higher ground or standing in different areas of their properties to get a signal.

In the case of farmers, often working alone on their properties, this is an unacceptable health and safety risk. Some residents have opted for the more expensive satellite phone option but others rely on patchy mobile phone coverage.

Conclusion

An expansion of mobile coverage into parts of Gippsland should be considered in partnership with improving access to the internet through wireless services.

By virtue of their location, those who live in regional and remote areas are the very people who depend more heavily on reliable communication for their safety, efficient operation of businesses and social interaction. The safety of those travelling through regional areas should also be a key consideration in the application of this funding program.

The results from my 2013 electorate wide survey indicated that only 28 percent of respondents believed that their mobile phone coverage was adequate and 25 percent were satisfied with their internet service.

Of these respondents, two thirds believed that it was the government's responsibility to assist industry to improve mobile phone black spots.

I would be grateful for my submission to be considered as part of the government's assessment of its Mobile Coverage Programme and I am happy to expand on my comments if required.

Listed below are the towns and localities which have been brought to my attention as having poor or no mobile phone service:

East Gippsland

Anglers Rest
Bete Bolong
Bindi
Bonang
Buchan
Buchan South
Clifton Creek
Combienbar
Flaggy Creek
Gelantipy
Glen Valley
Lake Tyers Beach
Orbost
Reedy Flat
Sarsfield
Wiseleigh
Wulgulmerang

Wellington

Briagolong
Dargo
Devon North
Glenmaggie
Licola
Hyland Way
Munro
Tarra Valley
Willung
Willung South
Woodside
Won Wron

Latrobe City Council

Blackwarry
Callignee
Carrajung
Churchill
Cowwarr
Glengarry
Gormandale
Jeeralang Junction
Koornalla
Toongabbie
Traralgon South
Traralgon North
Yinnar

Yours sincerely



DARREN CHESTER
The Nationals