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To: [secretariat@rtirc.gov.au](mailto:secretariat@rtirc.gov.au)  
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2018 Regional Telecommunications  
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Dear Secretariat

I live in rural/regional Australia and have found that mobile phone and data coverage in many areas of northern NSW and southern Queensland is basically appalling.

In recent years I have travelled to housesit in a range of locations between Bundaberg and Port Macquarie.

Many of these locations are rural, some small farms and others 'lifestyle' properties. Being responsible for pets and livestock while their humans are away, it is daunting to be alone down the bottom paddock filling water troughs with little or no mobile reception, even if there is a landline (and wifi) back at the house. That is too far away if you disturb a brown snake or a horse shies and kicks you. The neighbours may not hear your emergency whistle. Farmers face these risks every day.

Even in some towns and villages, mobile reception is unreliable. Southside Gympie for example. Taking care of business and maintaining social connections is very difficult in these circumstances.

Rural Australia has serious access problems. Telstra boasts coverage for 95% of Australians, but they live on 5% of the continent. The rest of us, spread across 95% of the continent, struggle to access reliable telecommunications and internet, except when we are in the major towns, although we are often out of range in transit.

This lack of access hampers both business and social cohesion. You can't ring Lifeline, Beyond Blue, Healthdirect or "000" with "no service".

Storms too often disrupt both power infrastructure and NBN telecommunications, leaving rural people reliant on fast vanishing copper wire landlines and faint mobile signals for emergencies. And CB radio on the road.

Comments in relation to relevant questions outlined in your Issues Paper follow.

Thank you

Margaret Clarke

**1. What are the main barriers to people in regional communities increasing their use of digital technologies and possible solutions for overcoming these barriers?**

Hills, mountains and trees!

Perhaps we should completely flatten the landscape so that there is line of sight to telecommunications towers all the way across our broad, brown, and somewhat lumpy land. (Sarcasm alert!)

The trouble with digital technology is that it relies on line of sight for mobile communications. Anywhere in a valley or over the next range of hills along both sides of the Great Dividing Range is out of range for mobile calls and internet access.

Our most productive agricultural land is often along creeks and river flats, whether small scale or broad scale. If there is only copper wire, then reasonable internet speeds for business or home schooling must come by satellite.

If there is no copper wire, you have to go to town (twenty to fifty kilometres each way) for internet and phone calls and keep a CB radio handy for medical and other emergencies.

The Mobile Black Spots program seems to be responding to black spots on our major highways, but there are so many roads. People on business, family visits, rural workers between fruit picking jobs, and grey nomads can often be found on the roads less travelled.

## **2. How are people in regional communities currently using their broadband service and how might they increase the benefits of using this technology?**

Business folk may have websites if they have reception to service them. This can be difficult for some farmers and other people operating small businesses, especially from rural homes where reception may be unreliable.

Reliable reception without dropouts is vital. For example, internet banking. The last time I needed to use it, being too ill to drive to town, it took two hours of repeated drop outs to pay one bill. I refuse to attempt a MyGov account. Asides of data security issues, I do not have enough reliable reception to complete any kind of transaction online, unless I go to town.

Online shopping is very popular in regional areas where the nearest shopfront store (for specialist items) may be several hundred kilometres away. Your new solar panels from Jaycar, or car or water pump parts arrive by courier within days.

Books, knitting wool and other postable educational and craft items take longer, now that Australia Post has reverted to pre-Cobb and Co delivery systems.

## **3. What data-intensive activities are occurring in regional, rural and remote Australia? What digital technologies are needed for these?**

Living a long way from town, many rural folk stream movies and other entertainment and games, especially on Friday and Saturday nights. My mobile reception is hopeless at these times as the local towers are not designed for the peak loads of these activities. I do my internet access between 6 and 8 am on weekends.

## **4. How can regional businesses better utilise digital technologies to maximise economic benefits?**

This question may be the wrong way around. How can improvements to digital technologies be made available for regional businesses?

## **5. What can be done to improve access to and uptake of telecommunications services in remote Indigenous communities?**

It needs to be reliable and affordable. There also needs to be some kind of short-term and intermittent access arrangements for people who move around a lot, especially for seasonal work and family care. NBN is fixed and can be very expensive compared to the mobile access plans that city folk enjoy.

## **10. What economic or social indicators could be used to guide investment to further improve mobile coverage?**

Social isolation is a big problem in regional areas. Average incomes are also lower, with high unemployment, often seasonal work and less disposal income. Affordability is an important issue. Having a mobile phone does not necessarily mean that people can afford internet access through it. Free internet access through public libraries is very important for social, educational, health and business interactions.

Most decisions about improving mobile coverage are based on resident population statistics, rather than the actual number of people in an area at any particular time. There are many travellers and seasonal workers in regional Australia.

For example, Byron Shire suffered for several years from “festival overload” on mobile coverage. (Add an extra 50,000 people to a system for four or five days.) Most of the major festivals now bring in temporary towers. Temporary towers may be a partial solution for areas with distinct tourist or harvest seasons or activities.

**11. Is information readily available regarding how to use devices to improve mobile reception in areas with poor coverage?**

You have to go hunting for such information and the people with the information want to maximise their profit. No matter how many external antennae you add to your phone, no reception is no reception. I have spent hundreds of dollars for NO improvement in reception.

Mobile phone companies do not routinely provide information about the strength of the transceiver in mobile phones, notwithstanding Telstra’s Rural Tick system.

I don’t care about all the add-ons in the glossy brochures, I want a strong transceiver! And I want the transceiver strength and range printed on the box.

In the last decade I have been involved in several rural medical emergencies without access to 000. Not “emergency calls only”, but “No service”. Nobody has died due to first aid skills, basic meds and local help to evacuate the patient to proper facilities and care, but ... “No Service” can too easily be fatal.

Although it is now illegal to access Emergency Services on CB radio, that would not deter me to save someone’s life. It is the only communications system that MAY work in a “No service” area. I carry a medium strength CB radio in my car.