



Your strong and independent voice for livestock producers

Regional Telecommunications Review 2018

Livestock SA represents 3,500 sheep, beef cattle and goat producers in South Australia, who are spread right across the State including the pastoral region. These producers continue to express concern and frustration about regional telecommunications. However, it is noted that there have been some improvements since the 2015 Review with the rollout of NBN in some areas and the continuous efforts to remove some mobile blackspots.

As acknowledged in the Regional Telecommunications Review 2018 Issues Paper, telecommunications services are vital to participate in modern society. This includes farming businesses and farming families as well as their local rural communities. For livestock producers this includes marketing of livestock and accessing real time information to guide business decisions. Recently Livestock SA conducted a general survey of its members, and of the 360 respondents 55% indicated reliable internet and phone coverage were significant factors affecting their profitability.

On behalf of our members, Livestock SA has been liaising in particular with Telstra on their services in regional South Australia. There is the potential of maximising existing services through engagement with regional advisors and building a 'coalition' to support investment in mobile infrastructure in regional areas. In addition, there is the continued need to develop communications that meet the future innovations around livestock monitoring, remote sensing, and similar aspects. Future efficient farming will need to be supported by effective, fast and reliable telecommunications.

In relation to mobile blackspot funding, Optus must also be commended for some of the work they are doing in the pastoral region at places like William Creek and Marree. They have small cell technology working off satellite and are looking at expanding that process. This will assist not only pastoralists, their businesses and families, but tourists who visit the outback every year.

Pastoralists are very dependent on having good telecommunications. There is a reliance on telecommunications for education and medical support. It limits them in accessing further education, keeping in touch with family and friends, participating in webinars and other online forums for both business and education. Phone conversations can be impossible over older satellite radio phone technology and are also subject to interference from heat, rain, cold and cloud cover.

In all rural areas there is a need for good telecommunications for emergencies and disasters including bushfires. Ambulances all now have an MDT (mobile data terminal) that is used to dispatch jobs, give updates and generally keep ambulance staff informed as jobs progress. These rely on GRN and mobile coverage. The lack of mobile coverage on roads and highways especially is putting people's lives at risk, as well as hindering any coordinated efforts between other emergency services. This is especially important in rural areas where there may not be exact address, and complicated scenes with multiple casualties. This also applies to CFS and SES services as well.

To assist towards this submission, Livestock SA members were invited to provide brief comments on the situation on their property, with blackspots, lack of coverage and any other issues.

Some of the concerns raised about telecommunication services locally were:

- no service on mobile phone only 4 kilometres from aerial and can see the aerial
- can only get Wi-Fi in one room of house
- landline can be scratchy and go off when rain events
- unreliable NBN satellite
- price of data rising at alarming rate
- considering switching off ADSL prior to high speed reliability of NBN
- expectation from city folk that we have same speeds as they do for sending large data files (particularly accountants)
- blackspots and dropouts regularly for both mobile phones and wireless broad band
- original old telephone lines so cannot use dial up
- not able to access broadband
- constant landline failures through lack of maintenance and an out-dated exchange that needs replacing
- in a blackspot area with no mobile service access; and told too few residents to justify cost of providing – not profitable return to provider.

Members were asked what data-intensive activities do you or your family do that needs good internet access? Answers included:

- everything the city folk do and want, plus more
- simply running our business, emails, online banking, cordless and landline EFTPOS, running cloud based financial programs such as MYOB, payroll, transfer of data files to professionals such as accountants, online news services
- banking, emailing photos/film/videos and communication
- we rely on Internet for farm communication/on-line shopping/ emergency communication. (Our property is way out from town in a sparsely populated area)
- we use a lot of cloud-based software that requires regular and fast syncing.

Those with satellite or fixed wireless broadband services are finding that they have ongoing issues and largely have not been able to overcome these. However, some with access to the Sky Muster satellite service have taken up access to this service.

There were negative responses to the question “Is information readily available regarding how to use devices to improve mobile reception in your area? E.g. information about external antenna equipment?”:

- difficult as our business has multiple sites where internet services are required. Also, very hilly terrain poses problems with antenna
- have had new aerial installed for wireless but problem remains
- external antenna is a waste of money and time as anyone we know that have installed this here after experiencing it would never have spent the money on it
- Telstra leave a lot to be desired with actual products they sell for the benefits gained
- yes, but this comes at a cost and since our service has gotten worse since the introduction of 4G I do not believe we should pay extra for a service that has decreased in quality.

There were only a few replies to the question “What emerging digital services do you think will be of most benefit to your business?”:

- well priced reliable NBN
- use of and access to existing infrastructure
- 5G satellite /wireless

One specific example given was that the “NBN optical cable runs on the other side of the highway and Telstra optical cable is at the Mount Jagged Exchange very close to our business office, 300 metres away, which is not available for connection.”

The question “What broadband services are people using other than those available through the NBN?” received the following responses:

- not on the NBN yet
- mobile phone data is the only other service apart from ADSL 2 available through copper wire
- our NBN is possibly as good as it gets – it is overloaded, and our computer cannot be relied upon for use 24/7. Recently too many long-time drop -outs with no pre-warnings when maintenance is being done. Seems to always have a problem at times when you absolutely need to use the Internet.

On how more competition can be encouraged in the provision of broadband services in regional Australia, the points made were to use existing infrastructure and reliability is needed. While there is now definitely more competition from other providers, producers want reliability and cost-effective value-for-money services.

In summary, the following responses show what Livestock SA producers on the whole feel about regional telecommunications –

“I hope the NBN system will be better.”

“We are definitely disadvantaged by living in rural Australia. We are under-represented in our political system.”

“Less populated country areas deserve the same services as city people expect and take for granted. We pay taxes but sometimes fail to see any gain in our region from them.”

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