



SUBMISSION TO THE MOBILE BLACK SPOT PROGRAM ROUND 5A

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CITRUS AUSTRALIA

[Citrus Australia](#) is the Industry Representative Body (IRB) for citrus growers nationwide.

Based in Mildura, Victoria, Citrus Australia is a non-profit company limited by guarantee that was reformed in 2008, and today is supported by over 300 grower and affiliate members.

Citrus Australia is governed by an enthusiastic skills-based [board](#) comprising of four grower member directors and two independent directors. It facilitates [eleven committees](#) comprised of growers and industry-based specialists representing major growing regions, with a focus on key industry issues.

Operations are managed by a small, dedicated and passionate [team](#) of people, working to both develop the citrus industry, and provide services to growers.

Citrus Australia facilitates market access for growers and export expansion by eradicating barriers to export markets through Government liaison; driving the Australian Citrus Quality Standards to maintain fruit quality; and developing more effective export promotion programs.

Government advocacy is a focal point for reliable access to irrigation, as well as skilled unskilled labour. Citrus Australia has a strong focus on biosecurity and surveillance, access to safe and sustainable chemicals, and coordination of industry research and development.

CITRUS EXPORTS

Australian citrus is one of the country's largest horticulture industries, with commercial production of almost 800,000 tonnes across 27,000 hectares of farm land, in six states and territories.

Approximately one-third of produce is exported, one-third is sold on the Australian domestic market for fresh consumption, and the remaining third is further processed into juice products.

In the past five years, export volumes have increased from 158,000 tonnes in 2014 to 291,000 tonnes** in 2019. As a result, the industry contributed almost \$900 million to the GDP through farm gate sales in 2019, including \$540 million in exports alone.

Figure 1 (page 3) indicates major Australian horticulture exports by state, and signifies production levels of citrus in Western Australia, South Australia, Victoria, New South Wales and Queensland.

Growing regions in each of these states are located along freight corridors that have been identified in the Roads of Strategic Importance (ROSI) program.

The citrus industry is a major employer in regional and rural Australia, with an estimated 25,000 people employed in citrus production in casual and permanent jobs across over 1,500 citrus growing businesses, and more in allied businesses such as packing sheds, processors, marketers, exporters, and agrichemicals.

** Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) via Information Handling Services (IHS) Global Trade Atlas.

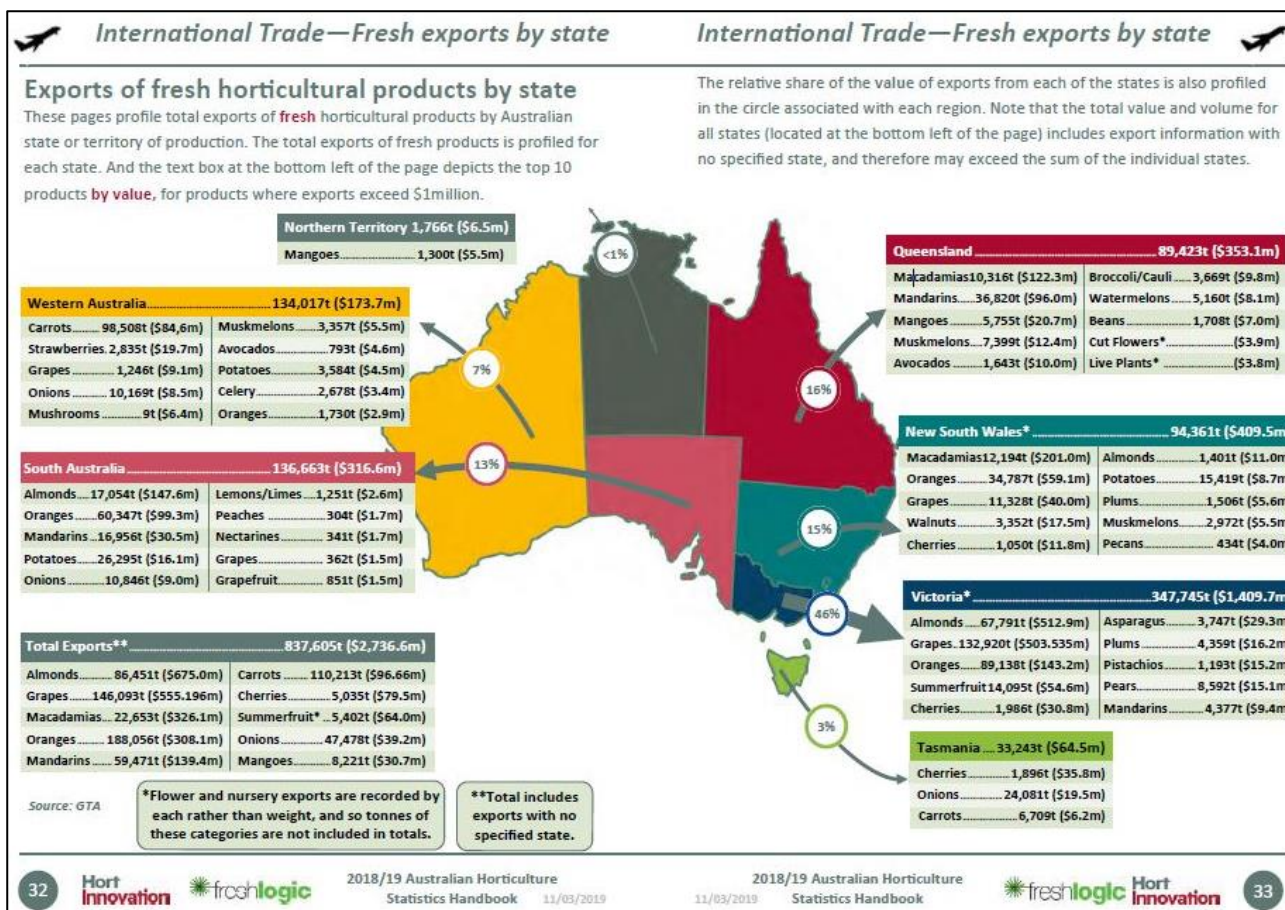


Figure 1: Exports of fresh horticultural products by state

CITRUS AUSTRALIA'S POSITION

Citrus Australia welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the federal Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Communications in regards to the Mobile Black Spot Program – Round 5A.

In such a vast and expansive country, Citrus Australia appreciates the difficulties of providing strong and consistent mobile phone coverage and is supportive of the suggestions to provide access to increased coverage, as well as a greater choice of mobile network. The latter is particularly important to growers; competition is healthy for customer service and product offerings for those in rural and regional areas.

The daily use of major regional and remote transport corridors is paramount to the timely and efficient transportation of fresh produce to markets for domestic sales, and to ports for export.

Citrus Australia strongly supports the development of infrastructure to improve mobile coverage in the areas identified in the ROSI program, that correspond with citrus growing and transportation regions. Reliable communication is a significant factor in not only relieving the frustrations and challenges faced by growers in a COVID-19 environment, but in continuing to work towards the Australian Government's goal of the agriculture industry reaching \$100 billion by 2030.

Citrus Australia conducted a survey amongst grower members who were located on or near a highway from the ROSI initiative. A summary of feedback is provided under each relevant project.

CITRUS GROWING REGIONS & ROSI

Renmark to Gawler

The Riverland in South Australia is based along the Murray River, and includes regional townships such as Renmark, Loxton and Berri. The Renmark to Gawler upgrade follows the Sturt Highway to the state capital, and connects with key arterial roads which will open access to horticulture's essential freight networks.

The 2019 Australian Citrus Tree Census identified that 20 per cent of total national hectares of citrus are produced in the Riverland, across 323 orchards.

Thirty-two grower member* businesses were surveyed by Citrus Australia and 40 per cent responded.

100 per cent were in support of increased mobile phone coverage, and a greater choice of mobile network, along the roads between Renmark and Gawler.

There was an obvious strength in numbers amongst survey results, which indicated that poor coverage in this area has led to much time and money wasting, an inability to connect with staff, and a loss of business and business relationships, due to missing phone calls, emails and critical information.

It was clear that increased coverage would simply lead to better communication and smoother operating for businesses, as well as the ability to use more innovative technologies including sustainable water practices which require reliable connectivity.

In addition, growers have highlighted Moorook and Renmark as poor service areas, and that living just a few kilometres from the tower still results in no coverage potentially due to a drop in transmission power.

Melbourne to Mildura

The Murray Valley citrus growing region is centred around Mildura, and encompasses citrus growers on the border of Victoria and New South Wales throughout the Sunraysia district. Upgrades along the Calder highway/freeway will increase productivity along this 600km freight route, for fresh fruit travelling to Melbourne markets, and to the Port of Melbourne.

The 2019 Australian Citrus Tree Census identified that 21 per cent of total national hectares of citrus are produced in the Murray Valley, across 284 orchards.

Thirty-five grower member* businesses were surveyed by Citrus Australia and 12 per cent responded.

100 per cent were in support of increased mobile phone coverage, and a greater choice of mobile network, along the Calder between Melbourne and Mildura.

Growers highlighted the importance of being able to communicate in real time with buyers at the fresh produce market in Melbourne, and that delays of even an hour can result in lost sales. Online grower education and access to important information is lost with poor coverage.

With increased network usage commencing in March/April due to COVID-19 isolation, and harvest in the Murray Valley starting in May, limited connectivity has become a more severe issue when trying to conduct business.

In addition, growers have highlighted that the Carwarp tower receiver now points away from users based outside of the Mildura municipality and their requests for support have not been responded to.

Echuca to Robinvale

Whilst the Murray Valley is the prime growing region for Victoria, there are citrus growers producing all the way along the Victoria and New South Wales border, from Mildura through to Wodonga, and further. A number of these growers are based along the Murray Valley Highway corridor and utilise this for access to regional hubs and capital cities.

Eight grower member* businesses were surveyed by Citrus Australia and 38 per cent responded.

100 per cent were in support of increased mobile phone coverage, and a greater choice of mobile network, along the Murray Valley highway.

Growers indicated the inability to make phone calls or use internet from their property, and the requirement to drive to higher points nearby to make a call. Poor internet services results in difficulties banking, paying staff and participating in dramatically increased requirement for videoconferencing due to COVID-19. Landlines phones are also inadequate due to problems at the local exchange.

Growers have specifically mentioned the non-existent coverage between Piangil and Boundary Bend, around the Natya, Kooloonong and Kenley Roads along the highway.

Cairns to Northern Territory Border Corridor Upgrade

The Cairns to Northern Territory border corridor will travel directly through Mareeba and Dimbulah, the two townships centred amongst the citrus growing region in Far North Queensland.

The 2019 Australian Citrus Tree Census identified that 3 per cent of total national hectares of citrus are produced in Far North Queensland, across 40 orchards.

Seventeen grower member* businesses were surveyed by Citrus Australia and 35 per cent responded.

100 per cent were in support of increased mobile phone coverage, and a greater choice of mobile network, along the Cairns to Northern Territory border corridor.

Growers highlighted a strong concern for their safety, being located in rural and remote areas with no mobile coverage to call for help in the event of an accident, and limiting the ability to manage Work Health and Safety on the farm. Growers cannot manage their businesses on the move and must continually return to the office to use the landline and try to follow up missed calls and check emails, which sets them back substantially.

Mobile coverage in this area would substantially improve communications for basic requirements such as suppliers and freight being able to locate growers when arriving onto the property. It would allow timely rectification of issues around fresh produce and fruit markets, and provide workers living onsite access to the internet. Sustainable water practices are also difficult access and operate as without coverage, automated water systems cannot be used.

Growers have highlighted that they have been pursuing this issue for several years with no response from government.

Great Northern Highway - Bindoon Bypass

The Bindoon Bypass is situated north of Perth, an area in Western Australia that is strongly populated by citrus growers.

The 2019 Australian Citrus Tree Census identified that 4 per cent of total national hectares of citrus are produced in Western Australia, across 62 orchards.

Ten grower member* businesses were surveyed by Citrus Australia and 60 per cent responded.

100 per cent were in support of increased mobile phone coverage, and a greater choice of mobile network, along the Great Northern Highway - Bindoon Bypass.

Growers highlighted that major concerns were the patchy connectivity when trying to make phone calls, and very slow uploading and downloading of data, making it impossible to seek information on the weather, and to use apps that have been designed to manage their business across a large area.

Increased coverage would allow better communication for freight logistics, increased safety in road emergencies, greater ability to use mobile technology in the orchard, and better utilisation of time spent travelling from the orchard to Perth by making business calls and checking emails.

In addition, growers have made suggestions for towers to be closer to the Bindoon/Moora Road, and to Dandaragan.

Toowoomba to Seymour – Newell Highway

The Riverina, centred on the towns of Griffith and Leeton in New South Wales, is the largest citrus producing region in Australia. The Newell Highway between Toowoomba, Queensland, and Seymour Victoria, is a critical link to capital cities and ports, and bypasses the Riverina region.

The 2019 Australian Citrus Tree Census identified that 30 per cent of total national hectares of citrus are produced in the Riverina, across 388 orchards.

Twenty-six grower member* businesses were surveyed by Citrus Australia and 10 per cent responded.

100 per cent were in support of increased mobile phone coverage, and a greater choice of mobile network, along the Newell Highway.

Growers in the Riverina indicated that it is sometimes impossible to organise freight logistics, and to communicate with transport providers, with limited access to 3G in the orchards. Growers in north eastern New South Wales also experience difficulties liaising with transport operators, for fresh produce to be transported along the Newell Highway to the Riverina for packing.

Aside from the Newell, it was indicated that the Coonabarabran to Tamworth roads also have very poor coverage.

* Grower member businesses refer to members of Citrus Australia. Whilst the figures for production are based on all citrus growers nationwide, those surveyed for this submission were Citrus Australia members.

APPENDIX

Survey results

Citrus Australia conducted a survey via email to Citrus Australia grower members, to ascertain the level of support for advocacy around the Mobile Black Spot Program – Round 5A. Growers were given four days to respond.

Question 1

Would you support increased mobile phone coverage, and a greater choice of mobile network, along the highway from <insert relevant highway here>?

Answer

Yes – 100%

Question 2

How would this improve your business?

Answers

Remark to Gawler

- Connectivity with staff and contractors.
- Ability to utilise the capabilities of our smart devices and the web to allow efficient running of business - basically saves time and gives access to opportunity.
- The amount of times we are discussing something very important our phones do drop out. This could be to an overseas exporter of local growers.
- It would provide better communication with customers and suppliers. Reduce frustration and save time and money.
- Better communication.
- Several phone calls made to complete a call due to consistent fall out. So improved service would mean better efficiency.
- It is the way a modern business operates today. Helps keep up with all necessary business operations.
- We cannot conduct business via mobile phone at our location in Moorook as we have NO service whatsoever.
- Conduct business in a timely manner without losing connection or taking forever due to slow internet. Time is money.
- Better contact with packing staff.
- Everything starting to use data, from irrigation to moisture probes, communication on farm, tractor tracking and communications, and safety systems all use data.

Melbourne to Mildura

- It has been very noticeable in these challenging times the number of black spots and also with increased network usage we drop out more often - very hard to conduct business in this way.
- Occupational work safety, marketing and frustration.
- To be able to continue business while travelling.
- Greater communication particularly when travelling.
- Timely communication. Faster communication. Wider communication.

Echuca to Robinvale

- There is a dead coverage area between Piangil and Boundary Bend around the Natya, Kooloonong and Kenley Roads along the highway. A tower in this region would also cover the Kenley region which struggles to get a service even with boosters and aerials. Communications in this area are very limited and the land lines are even worse due to problems at the local exchange.
- Very inefficient to have telecoms dropping in and out while travelling.

Cairns to Northern Territory border

- Need mobile signal to stop dropping out.
- Better use of farm technology that needs mobile reception.
- Everyone needs a reliable phone/internet network these days, a lot of people now are working on the road and use these services for their office and also for safety.
- 90% of our business is conducted on the phone. Having to use a landline decreases your productive time doing other things, e.g. tractor work. Not missing important phone calls due to no service.
- WHS issues with limited communication.
- This would improve my business by:
 - Better communication with my agents at the fruit markets.
 - Allows me to quickly rectify any issues that may occur with our fruit at any point in the process. I am currently limited to being informed of issues when I check my landline or my emails.
 - It would give us better access to communicate with our suppliers when we need packaging, and other agriculture inputs.
 - In cases of emergency we are able to receive help quicker. Especially being out in the field, if we require emergency help we are able to access support quicker.
 - It is also beneficial for when suppliers, freight and other businesses we work with come to the property and are unable to find us. They will be able to contact us through the mobile service. Currently this is an issue as if we are not in the house, these people are unable to locate us and may leave.
- Currently no reception. Safety of all workers. Ag is going over to a lot of apps and live reporting. Limits growing practices with newer technology needing better signal.

- Increase safety and welfare of workers and families. Able to communicate with employees, suppliers and customers 24/7. Provide internet to employers and families without coverage.
- Increase use of automated watering systems saving water as without coverage we cannot use.
- Increase use of online programs for farm safety, wages, training, day to day operations as currently paper is the only option without coverage.

Bindoon Bypass (WA)

- By maintaining mobile coverage with Transport, Farming and Processing operations at all times.
- Improve communication for freight logistics.
- Improved road safety for emergencies. Ability to make use of travel time to Perth. Able to conduct business, send emails (not whilst driving), use internet away from office.
- Greater ability to use mobile tech in orchard.
- May not improve my business but would improve others in that area.

Toowoomba to Seymour

- Communicate with transport.
- Our oranges are transported from Gunnedah to Griffith for packing. This involves about 80 b-double movements along the Newell. We need to keep in contact with the transporters to coordinate loading. This is often not possible.

Question 3

Please advise how limited network coverage currently impedes operations for your business.

Answers

Renmark to Gawler

- Miss timely information - market etc.
- Safety aspect of lack of connectivity.
- Limits access to some of our apps as they are web based.
- The ability to communicate in "Just in time" is greatly affected.
- Particularly in Moorook on the lower main road and at Wigley Flat there is reduced coverage. It impedes business by cutting off or slowing down communication and transfer of data at times. This causes frustration, wastes time and costs money. In terms of communicating with customers it could damage relationships and result in loss of business.
- Lack of communication.
- Unable to communicate with staff.
- Time wasting traveling to a service area.

- We receive messages and missed calls up to a week after they've been made.
- We used to have a tourism business on our citrus property several years ago. We missed many calls for enquiries and if we ever received them the call would drop out. Consequently, we now have long term tenants in our units who complain constantly that they have no phone service.
- Unable to do banking and any online requirements without getting frustrated or stressed out.
- At time you get no service at all around Renmark.
- Drop outs (constantly), and quality of connection is dropping.
- Poor data connections.
- Time taken to do jobs taking longer.
- Communication between workers can be reduced due to poor signal.

Melbourne to Mildura

- The fresh produce market is live and it is real - you need to be able to respond to buyers with quality, pricing and availability of fruit - not being able to respond even for an hour can mean a lost sale.
- I miss lot of calls in my marketing program and drops out constantly.
- While travelling I am unable to conduct my business. It puts a hold on things.
- Urgent issues cannot be addressed. Delay in getting important information to staff in a timely manner.

Echuca to Robinvale

- Communications with workers is limited and often we need to drive to a higher location to make and receive calls. Calls drop out when talking with customers leading to increased frustration and anxiety. We also rely on the mobile signal for internet coverage - when the signal is low, our internet is impossible to use making business transactions difficult. Increased frustrations with the COVID-19 as much is now done with Zoom meetings for which our signal is not up to.
- We have to drive to certain spots on our property just to answer a phone call.

Cairns to Northern Territory border

- One point of access on farm. Emergency calls can't be made.
- If you break down in a black spot you cannot call for assistance.
- If you are on your way to or from a place and you are required to turn around there is no way of people contacting you.
- Having to be near the landline to take and make important phone calls decreases productivity.
- WHS issues with limited communication.
- Receiving messages too late because there is no reception.

- The limited network coverage impedes operations in my business in a number of ways. The mobile coverage is currently limited and unreliable. This causes a number of issues including the fact we waste time and resources sitting in the house for agents, suppliers and other businesses to return calls. Furthermore, many people/businesses do not understand our lack of mobile coverage and therefore ring our mobiles. This is problematic because we only receive these calls when we go into a receptive area. These areas are restricted to our house which in itself is patchy. The only reason I currently have mobile reception in my house is because I invested money in boosters. However, these boosters only provide a minimum amount of relief because the reception is poor from the beginning. The reality of the matter is in this modern day and age it is difficult to run a business from only a landline. Mobiles form an integral part in today's business world and we are falling further and further behind.
- We have no reception on a 350Ha orchard.
- Workplace health and safety of employees, not able to contact them via phone.
- Automated water systems and online farming tools need coverage.

Bindoon Bypass (WA)

- There are definite areas of very poor coverage along this proposed route, staff travel this route regularly and continually encounter drop outs.
- Patchy connectivity, frustrating phone calls, VERY slow data uploads and downloads, inability to check records, weather etc, remotely.
- Immensely! So much technology and connectivity that cannot be achieved because of lack of network coverage.

Toowoomba to Seymour

- Limited and variable 3G in our orchard, communication with transport providers is limited.
- Difficult to coordinate transport without mobile coverage.

Question 4

Any other comments?

Answers

Echuca to Robinvale

- The tower between Boundary Bend and Piangil is very small and has very limited coverage - maybe this could be increased/improved or replaced with something bigger please.

Melbourne to Mildura

- The internet/NBN coverage in rural areas is nothing short of useless - this again was highlighted during home-schooling where you couldn't even get your emails as there was low bandwidth.

- The Carwarp tower receiver now points away from Iraak's direction towards Mildura. This was turned four years ago. I find this very unfair and I have complained but as usual no response.
- Also a safety issue - if there is an incident or accident on site where there is no mobile coverage. Time delay in accessing help.

Renmark to Gawler

- It is a disgrace given how much we pay for telco communication. Conducting business in Moorook is almost impossible with the lack of mobile service coverage in this area.
- We live about 3km from the tower. Telstra used to be good. While they will say they have not dropped transmission power off the towers, they must have. Now I cannot get service in my house. Used to be able to go from Renmark to Adelaide with no drop outs. Now there are black spots in service.

Cairns to Northern Territory border

- This has been an issue that I have been pursuing for several years. Dimbulah has a tower, however the service it provides is limited within 5km of the tower. We have been seeking to have a repeater station for another tower for this area to provide us with a more reliable service. You must understand I have been pursuing this issue for at least a decade. However, me and my fellow farmers calls to action have fallen on deaf ears. I have previously written to both our federal and state members and received no support on this issue. There are approximately 115 farms in this region that do not receive adequate mobile coverage. These farmers grow a variety of crops with an estimated value of \$130 million dollars.

Bindoon Bypass (WA)

- There are further black spots between Bindoon and Moora on the Bindoon/Moora Road.
- Would be great if the towers were closer to Dandaragan.

Toowoomba to Seymour

- The Oxley highway from Coonabarabran to Tamworth also has poor coverage.