

To Whom It May Concern, Including:

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Regarding: Round 5A of the Mobile Black Spot Program and the Telecommunications Emergency Resilience Package:

First, on behalf of the local residents, I'd like to thank you for doing another Blackspot round, and for recognizing our critical communication issues in the remote bush of the Alpine District. My wife and I battled for our lives and property during the '03 fires, surrounded by 2.5 million acres of bushfire which overwhelmed our property and ourselves after three weeks of rather tense waiting for it to hit, and the phones were out to boot. We had thankfully made our bush block defensible and thus escaped with our lives and little material loss. These latest 2020 fires looked to be a repeat, however the wind changed at the last minute and we were spared, with the fire's edge stopping literally at our doorstep. Our farm neighbors weren't so lucky however, losing hay sheds and fencing, whilst manically driving around in their utes with water tanks (slip-ons) to save what they could of their cattle and property.

In the first case, in '03, we had zero backup from emergency agencies or strike teams, and all communications were out. In the latest case we were thankful to have had tanker and strike team crews and vehicles from CFA and DELWP. Unfortunately, the most glaring need in both cases was and remains communications. Despite everyone in our valley – the Bundara Valley at Anglers Rest – having UHF radios (several donated after the '03 fires) and several homes having large UHF rooftop antennas, communications during the most critical moments were difficult at best, to zero at worst. Coms between residents who stayed in their homes to defend them or who drove slip-ons to fight the fires, volunteer strike teams, and CFA & DELWP Incident Commanders was erratic to non-existent as well due to our mountainous terrain and extremely remote location. Likewise, our landlines were out from the initial lightning strikes (which caused both the '03 and the 2020 fires), or other issues such as loss of power to mobile towers, townships, burnt lines and poles etc. Thus, in both extreme emergency cases, we were left with little to no communications either between ourselves whilst battling the fires and trying to support each other, or to the outside world. This has been and remains issue number one.

The second issue is that since the final paving of the Omeo highway between Omeo and Albury-Wodonga a few years ago, the Omeo highway has seen an exponential explosion of all kinds of vehicular traffic. The Omeo highway was recently featured in a magazine as being one of the top

five most popular motorcycle roads in all of Australia. Caravan and vehicular tourist traffic has likewise increased significantly, and of course we continue to have the usual log and other heavy vehicles on our one-and-a-half lane “highway”. Whether on motorcycle or in cars or towing vans, many travelers are simply unused to handling their vehicles safely on windy mountain roads. This has resulted in a statistically significant increase in accidents, a large percentage of which involve injuries and death. Getting phone service to request police, fire and ambulance assistance has been extremely difficult on what is one of the longest stretches of road in Victoria with no mobile service, at about one hundred kilometers.

Many locals were excited a couple of years ago when Vodafone was awarded blackspot funding for a tower to be built at Glen Wills/Valley. We understood that Vodaphone had virtually no other services in the area, and thus nobody had a Vodaphone account, but at least it was a beginning, and perhaps we could convince Telstra to piggyback their service onto Vodaphone’s tower once built. Alas, it wasn’t meant to be, as it became clear that whoever at Vodaphone made the application was neglectful in the extreme as to real costs and efforts required. But that is another story, except to say that despite Vodaphone’s contract and commitment to provide this service, it didn’t.

Based on our recent conversation with Mark Wood, it seems that many of the issues with previous BlackSpot rounds are being addressed, and that we might once again have the opportunity to be able to get service along this long stretch of remote but highly trafficked highway.

My main points are:

- We’d like to encourage Ms. Willington and Telstra to apply to install towers in our area in round 5a. We believe we have some convincing arguments, some of which are noted below.
- We’re requesting a letter of endorsement from East Gippsland Shire and appropriate Victorian and Federal ministers, as well as the regional CFA, to support making the Omeo highway transport corridor between Omeo and Albury-Wodonga a priority for the next Black Spot rounds as it would be a totally new coverage area.
- We’d like to remind the governing body of this next round that our area has already had a tower awarded to Vodafone in a previous Blackspot round, and we request that we be given additional consideration in this upcoming round as a result of their failure to provide promised services. I believe that during our discussion with Mark Wood he mentioned the possibility of utilizing unused funds from previous rounds to benefit communities that “missed out”. Clearly we stand out in this regard.
- Apparently the commonwealth’s contribution towards projects like this has also been increased to help forward these most difficult installations, including more battery backup funding, backhaul, operations etc. as part of the resiliency package. Adding NBN satellite phone connections to fire centers is another excellent step forward. We’d like to share with you that we’ll be utilizing about \$10,000 in privately donated funds to upgrade our own CFA shed here in the Bundara valley. It presently has one old but serviceable slip-on unit in a small metal shed, but based on our locally universal agreement that communications during emergencies is our most critical issue, we’re

moving forward with a UHF repeater as well as a “Cell-Fi” mobile phone booster and antennas to facilitate both intra-local communications whilst on the fireground as well as coms to the outside world during emergencies. All of this should make a big difference. If we can coordinate our efforts with the agencies and/or the winning bidders to reduce redundancies we’d appreciate having a discussion.

- We were excited to hear that future towers would have the capacity to service anyone, no matter who their MNO happens to be. This of course is critical in regards to random accidents involving travelers from all over Australia, plus it would eliminate the issues apparent in Vodafone’s ill-conceived bid.
- We’re also very much in support of the new concept of covering significant transport corridors “end to end” rather than single locations. Clearly our 100 kilometer long stretch of remote and highly trafficked blackspot with a significant accident history is a prime location for this. The Omeo highway also clearly delivers significant economic and social benefits to the entire region, being the main north-south corridor through the Alpine and East Gippsland districts, as well as the only corridor open in winter providing access between the Riverina/Albury Wodonga region and Omeo/Swifts Creek and finally to Bairnsdale and the Princes Highway.
- We are clearly a disaster prone area, having experienced two of the worst firestorms in Australian history within the last twenty years, as well as being in the middle of the second largest national park in Australia (Alpine National Park), where a historical lack of focus, manpower, and funding by Parks Victoria has resulted in a massive tinderbox of millions of acres, traversed by thousands of tourists on both paved and unpaved roads. There are about twenty residences in the Bundara Valley at Anglers Rest, about a half-dozen in Shannonvale along Middle Creek, and about twenty more residences in Glen Wills/Glen Valley. Whilst this is presently a small population, good mobile reception would not only benefit those already here, but could increase the attraction of our area by people whose jobs depend on mobile reception.
- We were also happy to find your team is aware of the fact that Parks Victoria and DELWP oversee this vast terrain, and thus must be worked with in terms of tower locations and access, on-site infrastructure and construction requirements, cultural heritage overlays, etc. Cultural Heritage has sadly had a paralyzing effect on these agencies over the past few years. Your awareness of this fact and your determination to provide guidance, rules and agreements with these agencies to help projects move forward in a timely manner is absolutely necessary with an eye towards eventual success.
- Regarding a minimum of 4G coverage, it should be noted that the 3G signal remains the best long-range signal for mountainous terrain. 4G has shorter coverage, thus would be problematic in remote areas such as ours. Until and unless the technology changes, each tower should continue to provide 3G.
- Regarding the minimum of 12 hours of backup power, it should be noted that both in ’03 and 2020, our landlines were out for weeks. Whilst this might be too long for batteries, I would recommend Photovoltaic battery charging systems for long-term emergencies. This would not only be cheaper and longer lasting, but would negate the

need to truck generator fuel into a dangerous area closed to non-essential traffic, whilst we get to keep our phone service. Our own PV panels with DC to DC MPPT capability charged our off-grid batteries adequately, even during our smokiest days.

As locals and not necessarily part of the Blackspot or resiliency working teams, we're not sure how or if we can be part of the ongoing conversations or application process. If there is a way for this to happen, we'd like to take part. Please advise. In any case, please keep us in the loop as much as possible and thanks for your efforts.

On behalf of ourselves and our neighbors along the Omeo Highway between Omeo and the township of Mitta Mitta, including the residents of Anglers Rest, the Bundara Valley, Shannonvale, Glen Wills and Glen Valley, as well as the many thousands of visitors, tourists, whitewater paddlers, 4X4 drivers, hikers, bikers, hunters, fishermen & women, campers, motorcyclists and other through-travelers along the remote Omeo Highway, thank you for your time and efforts.

Sincerely,
Jefte & Carrie Aronson
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