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Australian Government Department of Infrastructure,
Transport, Regional Development and Communications
Email: MBSRound5@communications.gov.au

17 June 2020

Dear Sir / Madam,

**RESPONSE TO DISCUSSION PAPER ON MOBILE-BLACK-SPOT
PROGRAM FUTURE DIRECTIONS**

Background:

I live part-time at Pekina, a town and surrounding farming community which has never enjoyed access to mobile phone coverage. The area encompasses at least fifty families, spread along a 35km stretch of the Price Maurice Road running south of Orroroo towards Jamestown and Laura. Patrons of the Pekina Hotel, members of the Pekina Country Fire Service and sporting teams at the Pekina recreation ground are also affected by the lack of mobile coverage, as are commuters and tourists travelling this popular alternative route through the southern Flinders Ranges. The area is serviced by an increasingly unreliable landline telephone service and poor-quality satellite broadband internet. Access to a robust 4G mobile network would radically improve communications and boost the viability of farm and other businesses operating in the Pekina valley.

Power failures are a frequent event in our area, along with failure of the landline telephone service. At such times, older members of our community are especially vulnerable. In February this year my 84-year old next-door neighbour Claire Daly was badly injured in her home and was unable to call for help. She lay on her bathroom floor for eighteen hours before she was found. The emergency necklace she was wearing provided no assistance as the landline telephone had been out of service for a number of days. (See newspaper clippings attached with this submission.)

Pekina is less than 300 kilometres from Adelaide but, in terms of telecommunications infrastructure, it must surely rate as a remote area.

Responses to questions in the Discussion Paper:

Questions 1 & 2: I applaud the initiative to explore and utilise new infrastructure options such as ‘small cells’ to provide stable, good-quality coverage to black-spot areas with relatively small resident populations, assuming such technologies can actually provide an adequate and reliable service.

Questions 3, 4 & 6: It is essential that mobile phone networks do not limit access to subscribers of a single telco. The situations that occurs in many parts of rural Australia where mobile phone coverage is only available to Telstra subscribers in some areas and then available only to Optus subscribers in an adjacent or nearby area is ludicrous. Telcos must be coerced into sharing infrastructure so that all mobile phone subscribers have access to an available network.

Questions 5 & 7: Mobile phone coverage should be recognised is an essential service. As such, there must be equitable access to a reliable network irrespective of the capacity of local agencies or local residents to contribute to funding costs. At Pekina, residents are currently required to spend several hundred dollars per year to maintain an unreliable landline. We might also spend between \$1800 and \$3000 to install an antenna that *might* possibly provide mobile phone access to a particular premises. This is an unacceptable inequity. Lack of mobile phone coverage undermines public safety and community amenity. It is also an effective constraint on trade and enterprise. This unfair constraint and disadvantage has been further exacerbated throughout the recent COVID-19 shut-down when people everywhere have been increasingly dependant on robust telecommunication services.

I appreciate that funding for mobile network infrastructure may need to be co-funded by federal and state governments. However I do not accept that the onus should be on local communities to negotiate a co-funding arrangement. Government agencies and parliamentary offices have funded staff who are best placed to negotiate co-funding arrangements on a case-by-case basis.

Questions 8 & 9: Infrastructure should be designed so as to provide stable 4G coverage, with in-built capacity for upgrading over time as technology continues to evolve.

Questions 10 & 11: Given the evident frailty of the electricity network that services the Pekina valley, where we experience at least half-a-dozen extended power outages each year, it is essential that mobile phone infrastructure be equipped with auxiliary back up power.

Question 12; I appreciate that funding through the mobile-black-spot program has been allocated on a competitive basis, with proposals assessed against a set of criteria. However I stress again the issue of fundamental equity and the need

for *all* settled parts of the country to have access to reliable mobile phone coverage. Critical black spots will not be fully eradicated without government commitment to address this on a thorough, ongoing basis.

Closing comment:

The Pekina community has for many years sought assistance to rectify the lack of mobile phone coverage in our district. We have made multiple direct approaches to our federal and state members of parliament. We have made submissions to our local Regional Development Authority and to our local council. We have had many discussions with representatives of the major telcos. Each of these agencies has frequently referred us from one to another. No-one has so far been capable of addressing the issue. We therefore welcome this invitation to respond to your discussion paper as a new, direct avenue to put our case and to underline our keen desire for a remedy to our situation.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'M. McKinnon', written in a cursive style.

Malcolm McKinnon

Please note attachment –clipping from *Flinder News*, 26 February 2020