



Sweeter Banana Bread

2018 Regional Telecommunications Review Secretariat
Department of Communications and the Arts
GPO Box 2154
CANBERRA ACT 2601

3 August 2018

Dear Committee

On behalf of the Sweeter Banana Co-operative, based in Carnarvon, Western Australia I would like to make the following submission to your review.

Carnarvon is a coastal town of around 5000 people located 900 kilometres North of Perth, situated between the Shark Bay World Heritage Area to the South and the Ningaloo Reef World Heritage area to the North.

The Carnarvon Horticultural District is located to the North of the town centre, commencing at 5 kilometres from the town centre reaching up to 15 kilometres from the town centre.

The Horticultural District consists of 180 family run farms, that are situated on the North and South side of the Gascoyne River. Our farms are of small size (around 10 ha average) and located in close proximity. The town centre has access to NBN services via Fibre to the Node, however the majority of the Horticultural District has been left out and only has the option to subscribe to Satellite NBN. It has never been explained to us why Fixed Wireless was not considered as an option instead of the inadequate Sky Muster satellite.

The lack of provision of adequate internet and telephone services in the Carnarvon Horticultural district and the poor standard of services that are provided, has a significant impact on our region and our ability to do business, to attract businesses and staff and to retain the businesses, staff and families in our community.

The poor standard of service has resulted in increased costs to our businesses as we attempt expensive workarounds to make up for the lack of high speed reliable internet and phone services.

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Horticulture is the major employer and generates farm gate revenue of around \$100 million per annum in Carnarvon. This is a significant industry which has been left to deal with sub-standard telecommunication services.

In order to remain competitive in farming, we need to take up new technologies, agronomy services using drones and satellites, video conferencing services to access seminars and education, social media to communicate with other businesses and customers. Most of these things are impossible from the location of our business due to the lack of adequate services.

The issues are detailed below:

Inadequate Data Limits

NBN Broadband for our horticultural district is limited to Sky Muster Satellite Service. This service has low data limits at only 60 GB per month. Contrast this with any fibre to the node or fibre to the premises service that routinely have either unlimited data or at minimum 500GB per month.

There is the option on Sky Muster to access 190GB per month off peak – but only available if you want to send staff to work between 1 am and 7 am!

The data limits are woefully low for a business. We have four computers and the windows updates alone can exceed our data limits.

The issue with data limits needs to be immediately resolved for everyone on the Sky Muster service.

Speed and reliability

Sky Muster has incredibly slow speeds, poor reliability and especially poor reliability in bad weather conditions. The problem is so bad that our banking websites will not load at times. On many occasions we choose to drive into town (10 minutes away) to access the internet because it is quicker than waiting for the computer to load a website. In 2018 this is appalling for a business with a turnover of between \$5 and \$10 million. Our horticultural

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district generates around \$100 Million of revenue for Carnarvon, and the entire area is serviced via Sky Muster.

All technology and interfaces with customers now are internet based, our freight, Coles and Woolworths ordering systems, crate hire, ATO, payroll tax, banking, accounting, our intranet site, Dropbox, Google Drive, Government services, email – etc all are cloud based applications. Our staff cannot do their jobs when they cannot access high speed internet.

We upload our production data to our intranet every day, so our growers can see their production, quality and market returns. Sometimes it is easier to take the data on a USB, drive to town and then upload it. This is a ridiculous situation in the digital age.

The cost to our productivity is estimated to be around \$20,000 per annum in lost time and work arounds.

Education and youth

The Data limit and reliability issues also has an impact on education of our children. The only access to NBN is through Sky Muster, and much of the education curriculum - homework, study, research is internet based. The low data limits and lack of access to internet impacts on the students on the 180 families on horticultural properties. The ability for our children to access education, particularly in regional and remote areas where many high school subjects are only accessed by SIDE (School of Isolated and Distance Education) is creating a disadvantage in the education of our children. The lack of internet access compounds this. Any student who wishes to further their education by taking on line courses will find that they simply cannot access those services due to the low data limits and slow speed.

From a social perspective, children who can't access social media or streamed television are also at a cultural disadvantage to their peers. This can result in bullying and social exclusion.

Mobile Phone Service

There is no reliable mobile phone signal at Sweeter Banana. The packing shed along with McGlades road and other parts of the horticultural district are in a mobile phone blackspot. If our NBN internet is not working (which it often isn't) there is no alternative internet

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service. We have tried to rectify this by purchasing an additional 3G mobile service with Telstra, and an approved Telstra antenna on the roof of our shed. This is also unreliable as well as an additional expense, but a necessity because of the lack of reliability of the NBN service.

Fixed Line Telephone service

We can almost guarantee that whenever it rains we lose our fixed line phone service. Earlier this year it took Telstra four weeks to fix the problem. We lost our main phone number and our fax number and were down to just one incoming phone line which is the phone number only our members (growers) have.

Customers constantly received the engaged signal if we were on the phone as we were down to one line. Our fax was out altogether and at times we had all three of our fixed lines down with no way of alerting customers or diverting phones. This is completely unacceptable for a business, and many of our members also had similar issues with telephones out for weeks.

This year we have lost our Fixed Line service on at least 6 separate occasions, and each time for at least a week. This would not be acceptable in the city and I don't understand how anyone believes it to be acceptable in the country. It's not simply a business issue but with lack of mobile signal and internet it is a health and safety issue.

As there is no mobile signal at the packing shed if we need to make urgent calls whilst we had no land line, we had to step outside, walk up onto the bridge (subject to the weather conditions and the noise of passing trucks or birds/insects) just to be able to make a call. Making business calls standing on the edge of the highway is far from ideal and does not present a professional image. And the heat, sun and weather conditions at times made this unbearable.

Over the past few years the length of time it takes to resolve a fixed line problem has gone from a few days to literally weeks. I don't believe Telstra have engineers on the ground to fix these problems in Carnarvon and we need to wait for engineers to travel from other locations. Previously Telstra engineers that resided in Carnarvon were aware of the issues

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and problems and the diagnosis and resolution of problems occurred very quickly. The service now is simply appalling.

Each time the fixed line service goes down, we need to battle through overseas call centres who ask us to unplug the phones and check the modems etc to make sure it is not our equipment that is failing (which we know it is not), then wait around a week for a Telstra Engineer arrive, do the testing and establish yes it is truly a Telstra issue, then a wait of a few days or weeks while the fault is identified and then parts are ordered and the phone line is eventually fixed.

There needs to be an enquiry on how long Telstra are taking to resolve issues with fixed lines, particularly in regional areas where we don't have an alternative!. How many engineers do they now have in place to maintain ageing and poorly maintained fixed line infrastructure in the country?.

The staff at the end of the phone in call centres dotted around the world are ill equipped to deal with queries when you have no mobile signal and no NBN. Telstra closed the local business centre in Geraldton and Karratha where at least you could once speak to someone who understood where you live and the challenges you faced.

There is no-one for us to talk to even begin to understand how we can overcome these issues and provide better services. It is beyond the scope of our local IT support who look after our computers and there is no-one locally from Telstra or even on the end of the phone to speak to. We truly feel abandoned by both Telstra and NBNCo.

High quality telecommunication services are essential for business today, for the take up of technology and simply for productivity. The Horticultural district is now in a data desert thanks to the decision by NBN co to provide only satellite service. This puts Carnarvon at a competitive disadvantage to other horticultural regions such as Darwin where the horticultural district t was one of the first areas to get NBN. As we move into smart farming, and the potential for drone based/satellite technology to provide real data, enabling farmers to make better decisions, we may find Carnarvon is left behind as other areas move ahead.

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Access to the internet is now as important as other utilities such as electricity for the social and economic health of a community. In Nigeria they have examined the impacts and found a correlation between poverty and the lack of telecommunications technology. Ref: Ogunsola Grace Oluwatofunmi, Salman Kabir Kayode & Popoola Oluwafemi Adebola (2015) https://globaljournals.org/GJHSS_Volume15/6-Effect-of-Telecommunication.pdf I suspect the results would be the same if they examined Regional WA.

Providing inferior telecommunications services in our region results not only in reduced competitiveness in our horticultural industry, loss of community members as they leave and move to areas where it is easier to do business, reduced educational opportunities for our children, tourists will bypass the region without being able to access internet and economic growth, jobs and opportunities will be diminished.

Marketing and promotion of a region is also compromised when there is not enough signal to do a live stream or upload to social media. If you are not on the internet then you simply don't exist.

The problems also create real impacts on emotional health and well-being. I cannot explain the frustration of arriving at work and then not being able to do your job, having limited time and deadlines, and then spending hours on the phone in the 40 degree heat and humidity standing next to a highway on your mobile, trying to explain to a Telstra person on that it is not your equipment, it is a Telstra fault, and no they can't divert the landline to your mobile as there is no signal etc etc. when this is the third time in a month you have had to explain this.

There is a human cost to these issues. I have listened to growers in tears explaining their frustration at not being able to complete BAS statements or other time sensitive important tasks such as paying staff wages, and instead spending hours on the phone trying to get someone to acknowledge a problem and try to solve it.

Our farming community is ready and able to take up technology and compete with the worlds best, the question is whether our government and the companies will allow us to do that?

Yours sincerely

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