

Submission to the Regional Telecommunication Review Committee from the Hatfield and Clare Communities located within the Balranald Shire Council in South West New South Wales.

25/11/2011

The Secretariat
Regional Telecommunications Review Committee
By email: secretariat@rtirc.gov.au

Dear Sir/Madam,

Please accept this submission from the Landholders and some of our Business Partners within the Hatfield and Clare Community.

The communities of Hatfield and Clare are located in far south west NSW roughly halfway between the towns of Balranald and Ivanhoe on the Ivanhoe Road (See Appendix 1). The Ivanhoe Road stretches for 225 kilometres and Hatfield and Clare localities surround this road which has a gap of about 100 kilometres that is not in a mobile service area.

The residents of these localities are primary producers of sheep, cattle and crops. There are around 50 properties of varying sizes and each enterprise returns annual turnovers ranging from approx ¼ million dollars to 6 million dollars.

The community provides employment and business opportunities to a wide range of people – there is year round work for shearers, earth movers, builders, plumbers, windmill mechanics, wool buyers, stock and station agents and trucking companies to name a small few.

The Ivanhoe Rd is the main link between Mildura / Balranald / Ivanhoe. Tourists enjoy visits to Mungo National Park in the West and Willandra National Park in the North. This road is known as the 'wool track' and provides a direct route for wool to be transported straight down the line from places like Bourke and Cobar to the Southern Markets in Victoria.

Clare Public School stands out in this sparse landscape. It is literally a school in the middle of nowhere. It has stood the test of time and is a reminder to our small community that sometimes the impossible is possible, it's just a matter of the right people hearing our voice at the right time.

The Telecommunications review comes at an opportune time for this community as we are also in the process of writing to Telstra to request priority be given to our area for mobile phone service. The concerns raised in the submission will also be raised with Telstra in the new year. The contact details of all contributors are included on the following page.

We thank you for the opportunity to participate in the Regional Telecommunications Review and look forward to reading the outcome.

Yours sincerely,

(By email)
Claire Butler

 NSW 2715

Telephone: 

On behalf of the Hatfield/Clare Community

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THE DIGITAL ECONOMY

Question 1. How is the use of telecommunications services and information and communication technology (ICT) evolving in different industry sectors and what is the impact of these changes in regional Australia?

Minto Pastoral Co:

Technology is a fast evolving commodity. Businesses and organisations are continually adapting to these ongoing technological improvements. No industry or sector is immune from the affect of evolving telecommunication. Improved telecommunications has led to increasingly improved business and organisational efficiency. The impact of these changes and improvements are evident in rural Australia in 'both directions'. That is, the areas with improved telecommunications excel, and those that don't, can be left behind.

Most parts of rural Australia are isolated by their geographic location, and the people who reside and work in these areas are mostly accepting of this fact. In the parts of rural Australia where technology has been improved to 'keep up' with services available on the coastal fringe and cities, they have been able to reduce their geographic 'isolation' via the use of improved telecommunication services (WA mining communities are a good example of this). However, the areas of rural Australia that are yet to have access to improved telecommunications services, are left isolated not just geographically, but there is an increased sense of isolation when the rest of the country is able to communicate in a way that they can't.

In the opinion of Minto Pastoral Company (a large sheep enterprise operating across over 200,000 acres of pastoral land in Western NSW), we believe this simply isn't fair. Rural Australia must have access to the same telecommunication services as the rest of the populated areas of the country.

Jim and Joy Harris:

Telecommunications services and information and communication technology is changing rapidly. This is especially so for tradesmen who, in many instances, travel long distances to service their clients.

These tradesmen have an expectation that:

- a) they will have mobile phone service in order to conduct their business whilst they are out of the office;
- b) they will be able to access spare parts information whilst on the job, eg take photo (on mobile phone) of the part needed, send to supplier instantly, therefore client & technician can decide on best course of action without delay. Tradesmen are disrupted by a lack of mobile phone service and as a result are less keen to come to non service areas. Further, many are on call over busy periods, eg harvest and they need to be able to respond to clients quickly and efficiently.
- c) Cable NBN will bring in faster and better service for those who receive it. Those of us who don't will be disadvantaged as the extra capacity is taken up by government and business. The end result for those of us on inferior services will be further frustration and inability to properly access information.

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Claire and Shane Butler:

There is an overwhelming expectation that business can perform instantly to client needs. We need mobile phone service in order for our sheep farm to perform at its best. Without mobile phone service our stock agent cannot perform to the highest level expected. Similar farms to ours that have mobile phone service can have a stock agent look at the livestock on farm, phone the buyer, close the deal and arrange transport - all within 15-20 minutes. Without mobile phone coverage, we are forced to wait for the agent to 'get back in range' before he can make those important calls. Sometimes a day can go by before it's all sorted. It's worth mentioning that an average truck load of sheep is worth around \$60,000 so it's little wonder that this is an increasingly frustrating issue for farmers in this region. We continually feel that our business needs are 'getting left behind' compared to other businesses in mobile phone service areas.

The shearing Industry, earthworks operators and transport industry all rely heavily on mobile phones for maximising their business performance. When these people are working in our area (Hatfield/Clare) they are uncontactable and therefore their business suffers. These workers stay out during the week and cannot contact their family on their private mobile phones, they can't even perform simple phone banking transactions that city folk take for granted. Young workers in these industries are declining – they do not like coming out this far without their mobile phones and therefore their social media networks. In the next 5 to 10 years there will be extreme shortages of younger workers coming through these industries. Mobile phone service and the ability to communicate effectively will help entice workers back to this area.

Question 2. What is needed to extend and accelerate the role of telecommunications services and ICT in delivering benefits to regional economies?

Minto Pastoral Co:

The opportunity for mobile phone coverage as an absolute minimum, in rural areas where there are populations and communities existing, is imperative. There can be no excuse for these communities not being able to benefit from these same technologies as their town and city counterparts.

Jim and Joy Harris:

Our area would benefit greatly by mobile phone reception. The towers are already in place. We would delight in being able to take full advantage of the opportunities offered by the digital economy. Local residents keep up to date as much as possible: in our area a recent program called "Getting Connected: Information technology support for the Hatfield region" was very well received and benefitted 32 families. Teleworking could be of benefit to our area & activities that farmers fund - The NLIS data base could be run just as effectively in a rural area. It should not need to be run in a capital city.

Claire and Shane Butler:

Enhanced technology such as mobile phone service and the flow on benefits of faster internet (wireless) would enable many women - who increasingly give up professional jobs to help their husbands manage the farm - to keep their skills by teleworking from home.

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Sylvia and Max Comitti:

A mobile telephone service would enhance the productivity of our farm enterprise procedures and decision making actions, having no service currently hinders such actions due to the delay and awkwardness of not being able to make private telephone calls of a confidential and urgent nature. (For example visiting stock and station agents negotiating livestock sales using the farmers landline – no privacy).

Jeff Mannix, Essential Energy:

The use of mobile phone services would increase our capabilities of providing a better supply of electricity to the consumers. Essential Energy has radio services but these are not 100% sure proof in all localities out in the Hatfield Clare areas.

Kim Cross, Balranald Inc:

Mineral Sands Companies are proposing to set up mines in this location shortly and the region will see a significantly increased population and the growing need for available, reliable telecommunication services.

Question 3. The committee would like to hear from businesses and organisations about their participation in, experiences of, and expectations about, the digital economy. Examples could relate to specific sectors such as agriculture, mining, manufacturing or retail; business-to-business activities; productivity; teleworking; and the development of new knowledge-based industries.

Pip and Bill Ryan:

As an agricultural business north of the towns Hay and Balranald, we find it very frustrating that we do not have reliable, if any mobile phone service. Simple day to day business calls become a challenge and any attempt to use new technology to make our business more efficient is at times impossible. This, in my opinion, is unacceptable considering the agricultural sector is a major contributor to the Australian economy and therefore **all** agricultural businesses should be able to operate using current basic technologies ie. mobile phones, with confidence.

We recently installed telemetry units at stock watering points to try and be more efficient with our labour costs and fuel usage. These units rely on having mobile service and so unfortunately are unreliable as is the coverage. We were very disheartened at this as there is such terrific new technology available but we still do not have the basics to be able to advance any further.

From a business point of view (let alone safety and emergency situations) I hope your review successfully seeks to install up to date mobile coverage in our area. Please do not hesitate to get in touch if further information is required. Many thanks for your consideration.

Minto Pastoral Company:

Minto Pastoral Company (MPC) is a large organisation, turning over 6 million dollars annually, and employing up to 20 staff annually. MPC is predominantly a sheep enterprise, with some cropping operations, and runs across various farming regions across central and south-eastern Victoria and south-western NSW. MPC runs a flock of over 35,000 breeding ewes across these locations, and sells over 45,000 prime lambs into the domestic and global lamb markets annually.

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Needless to say, MPC staff, management and stakeholders, rely heavily on telecommunication methods for day to day contact and reporting. MPC operations in south-western NSW are heavily affected and disadvantaged by lack of mobile coverage across the properties in these rural areas. The management of the logistics surrounding, staff, trucking companies, stock agents, cropping contactors and freight, shearing contractors, fencing contractors, share farmers, civil works, etc, is made all the more difficult without being able to contact people directly and immediately. The flow-on effect of this cannot be emphasized enough. There are huge operational inefficiencies created due to the inability to communicate via the mobile network on a daily basis.

More importantly, the safety of MPC staff and contractors is paramount, and their safety is compromised by not having the ability to instantly ring when there is a problem (flat tyre, sick stock, an injury or illness, broken down machinery, suspect trespassers, fire, the list goes on.....). MPC counteracts these issues by supplying UHF radios for all individuals and machinery. However, UHF's are relatively unreliable and really only work if there someone at the other end listening. This is not always the case. The use of a mobile phone in these situations would be far more effective and immediate.

Ray Roberts, Bemax Resources Limited:

Bemax are currently seeking licensing approval to commence mining at our Atlas-Campaspe project 100 kilometres north of Balranald. The project is in the Hatfield area and currently has no mobile phone coverage. Mobile phone coverage will become increasingly important over the next two years as work increases on site. Coverage will be essential when the mine is in operation.

Matt Bodinnar, LV Bodinnar Pty Ltd:

We turn over in excess of one million dollars in fuel and merchandise sales to our outback customers in the Hatfield, Clare and Mungo area per year. When trying to organise fuel and merchandise deliveries my employees are regularly forced to leave messages on land line phones causing huge delays to our business. My employees often have to do overtime of an evening to get in touch with these customers so we can load the required fuel and merchandise for the next day.

Once our trucks are out in these areas we cannot get in touch with them in regard to any changes required to their delivery run. This has in the past meant that customers have missed out on receiving fuel which they have needed and also that we have been unable to inform our drivers of rain affected roads. Without mobile phone coverage it could be a disaster waiting to happen. Eg. a truck breakdown or accident.

Mobile phone coverage is essential in these outback regions for everybody's safety and peace of mind. We would strongly support mobile phone coverage to this area, in particular for those who must conduct business in these localities. Not to mention the wider public with Mungo National Park having 50,000 visitors per year.

Darryl and Tanya Barrett, transport operators:

I own a number of trucks and regularly travel to farms in the Hatfield/Clare area. I have found that my business opportunities suffer because potential customers try to ring my mobile and if I am not able to be contacted they will ring another transport operator and I miss out on their business. Over the years, with technology moving at such a fast pace, my customers expect an instant response from me and they expect I can be contacted anytime.

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Mick Curtis, Newmarket Livestock and Property:

Our business is highly reliant on mobile phone coverage to operate effectively and safely. In the Hatfield/Clare area that we service there is no mobile coverage at all. This has the effect of us not being able to be in contact with our clients, our customers and our Victorian office whenever we operate in the area. We are effectively out of contact. It is a major impediment for our business and is a restriction of our existing trade providing no real incentive to expand our business in this area if we are unable to communicate with our stakeholders.

James Nevins, Auctioneers, Stock and Land Salesmen:

We have found communication within this area extremely unsatisfactory and possibly detrimental to our own business, not to mention the business of our clients.

Greenham Shearing:

My partner and myself are Shearing Contractors, we have been running this business since 1987. We work from Balranald and to the north including Hatfield, Ivanhoe and beyond. Eighty percent of our work is in the Hatfield area - that is the only area where we can't obtain mobile service. As we stay on these properties from Sunday afternoon until Friday night, we need to be able to rely on our mobile to successfully run our business. Our clients are continually complaining that they can't contact us when needed. If we lose an employee or just need to find more we have to wait until we are back in town on Friday. This has caused a detrimental effect on our business, as we have lost valuable clients, which means less work for our staff.

We can employ up to 50 people in one year. Our employees should be contactable in an emergency, day or night. Even just to stay in touch with their families while away. Having no service makes this near impossible.

AJ Stead Shearing Contractor:

We had shearers from away working in the Hatfield Clare area and they were astounded that they could not get mobile phone service. In this day and age it is not good enough.

Alan Lodge, Shire Overseer:

The lack of phone service severely restricts our communication options to the point that often a staff member has to drive to our work site to convey instructions which could have been conveyed by phone in most parts of Australia.

Melanie Scott, Principal Clare Public School:

Department staff regularly visit Clare school such as School Education Directors, consultants, maintenance and building inspectors, film makers and other personnel. These busy professional people are unable to be contacted whilst they are travelling to and from Clare.

Being principal of Clare I am concerned for student welfare. Parents travel with students to and from Clare school each day covering distances of up to 55km one way. These parents regularly need to be able to communicate via the telephone to the school and their homes whilst travelling to and from school safely.

The principal is often out of the school travelling on school business, they need to contact staff, parents, immediate family and community members at times whilst on the road. The flying padre is unable to reach home base to report departure and arrival times when he arrives at the Clare airstrip.

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Our school is a bushfire safety zone and recently properties in our Clare and Hatfield areas have been battling bushfires. Parents are unreachable if they are out fighting fires.

Many school and community events are held at Clare hall 20km south of the school throughout the school year such as athletics carnivals, birthdays, church services, trivia nights, fundraiser appeals, school concerts, meetings and Melbourne Cup celebrations. Again there are often large amounts of people at these special occasions and they are unable to access phone coverage in times of need.

The way the school conducts it's 'business' is at serious disadvantage without mobile phone coverage.

Inspector Steve Walker, Rural Fire Service Dareton:

The communication gaps are an impediment to the operation of all emergency services working within this area. Furthermore in this area in my day to day duties, the inability to communicate by mobile phone with landholders, other stake holders and the zone office regarding issues/business is hampered by the lack of this (mobile phone) technology.

Recent incidents in the northern area of Balranald of which the RFS was involved with (A house fire, a land search, three scrub fires and MVA's) were hampered by not being able to effectively communicate with volunteers who are working during the day on their properties. Once a person from a property initiates a call through "000", they then leave the residence to assist with the effort, therefore no further communications are forthcoming, until a brigade vehicle is on the scene.

Jock Harris, Grazier and Fire Brigade Captain:

When we do have fires which are usually started by lightning strikes they throw out the mains power, hence losing our UHF service. Wouldn't it be great when you are 60-80kms from home to be able to grab the mobile and check on the home front, or to ask someone to get the grader or pump from somewhere? We have a school with 13 students. I am sure that as parents of children you could be contacted at any time by their school unless you were visiting the Clare-Hatfield area, which does not have mobile phone service. Mobile phone service benefits our business, whether it be the stock agent wanting to ring trucks to shift stock after a sale, a call for help due to breakdown or a call to lessen the reception when you're two hour late getting home from a big day, sometimes 70-80kms from the homestead.

Melanie Scott, Principal Clare Public School:

The local mailman is also the small freight operator. Often the school, parents and community members are chasing him for important mail items, medicine and groceries. Without mobile phone services, it's increasingly difficult for him to run his business efficiently and for the community to benefit.

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Question 4. The NBN will help the range of online government services to continue to expand. The committee is interested in views and experiences about engaging with government services online, whether local, state or federal.

Claire and Shane Butler:

We use online government services. We voted and completed the Census online, we applied for a community liquor licence online for recent fundraising events, we access government policies and procedures online. We have found all of these processes easy to use and it avoids unnecessary travel.

Question 5. What are some examples of what you want to see happen to encourage greater participation in the digital economy by people living and working in regional Australia?

Jim and Joy Harris:

- Resolve issues with online shopping/contact details/internet security, for example on farmhub the code to unlock the sellers phone number will be sent via mobile phone. No mobile phone! It's the same with bank security issues- messages sent by mobile to confirm information, answer required immediately. Can't reply.
- The service needs to be there in order to encourage greater participation.
- In a modern business, whether it be city, regional or remotely based, the expectation of clients is that there will be immediate communication available. Mobile phones allow this.
- Travelling public expect there will be mobile service in case of emergency/breakdown. Farmers too often 'rescue' people after they have walked long distances or chanced to contact someone via UHF;
- stock and station agents need landline and mobile phone service to conduct their business. Visits from these personnel are essential to any farmers with livestock.
- Shearers and other workmen away from home for periods need to be contactable by their families, not possible at the moment.

Minto Pastoral Company:

Specifically in the Hatfield and Clare localities in western NSW, MPC would like to see **mobile coverage** be made available to these communities. This area is a well-resided area, with a pro-active community, schools, community organisations and a strong farming/pastoral presence. Farming and living rurally is an isolated way of life at the best of times, and having the opportunity to connect more readily with the 'rest' of Australia, is an opportunity all rurally-placed individuals, businesses and organisations should have.

Question 6. What are the main barriers to regional communities increasing their use of information and communications technologies and do you have any ideas for ways in which regional communities could progressively overcome these barriers?

Jim and Joy Harris:

Apart from no mobile service, cost of access to satellite internet services.

Minto Pastoral Company:

As mentioned in question 5, the biggest barrier to our specific community is not having a strong and reliable mobile phone service. This, followed closely by the inability to have a broadband internet service associated with this mobile

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coverage. The government and telecommunication companies must acknowledge and show some empathy towards the people and groups who still rely on a LAND-PHONELINE AS THEIR PRIMARY MEANS OF COMMUNICATION. This is NOT fair on rurally-located people and groups. It is old technology and these groups should have access to the same telecommunications services as their town and city counterparts.

REGIONAL HEALTH AND EDUCATION OUTCOMES

Question 7. Do you have ideas for ways in which high-speed broadband could enhance the delivery of education and healthcare outcomes in regional communities?

Melanie Scott, Principal Clare Public School:

Video conferencing facilities would benefit the students of Clare Public School by fully utilising the connected classrooms program:

Connected Classrooms Program technologies:

- Increase opportunities for collaboration between students
- Increase opportunities for collaboration between teachers
- Increase access to virtual excursions and events
- Increase access to specialist teachers and external experts
- Provide opportunities for gifted and talented students
- Provide additional transition strategies from Primary to High School
- Provide students with access to 21st century learning
- Enable the creation, sharing and delivery of curriculum content

Clare Public School is a satellite internet school and the satellite does not support this technology. The students cannot benefit from the connected classroom program. This has a negative effect on their education. Wireless Broadband would enable this program to be introduced and also enable the use of mobile phones in this area.

(Appendix 2)

Claire and Shane Butler:

Clare Public School keeps a flying doctor medical chest. Currently patients can phone the flying doctor on a landline and prescriptions can be made over the phone for medicines in the chest. Enhanced high speed broadband would enable use of video conferencing technologies for the doctor to more accurately diagnose and prescribe medicines. Having a mobile phone service would enable similar contact with the flying doctor as mobile phones also allow video calls. This would be a huge enhancement to medical services in this area. Clare is 155kms to the nearest small hospital (Balranald) with one full time doctor and nearly 3 hours by road to a larger hospital (Mildura).

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Minto Pastoral Co:

If high speed broadband has enhanced the delivery of education and healthcare outcomes in city areas, then MPC believes it's safe to assume that high speed broadband will significantly enhance the delivery of education and healthcare outcomes in regional communities to a level equal to if not higher, than their city counterparts. Providing increased technological access, is simply reducing the level of isolation that a rural community feels, and giving them access to the same resources and information that their city counterparts have had access to for many years. The playing field is being 'levelled' and services can increase in efficiency to levels that are more acceptable.

Question 8. The committee would like to hear from individuals and organisations about their participation in, experiences of, and expectations about, online health and education service delivery.

Jim and Joy Harris:

Our son is part of a trial on remote monitoring through CC2C (Connecting Clients to Care). This was set up by Mildura Base Hospital and involves the client taking blood pressure, blood oxygen etc and sending these readings via phone line to Mildura Base Hospital.

If the staff feel that there are unsatisfactory readings they phone the client and offer suggestions such as changes to medication. Obviously mobile phone coverage could make clients far more contactable and should that client need to, they can ring their care nurse at any time. Further, emergency medical information is available if needed through one simple phone call. (Not all emergencies happen in the house with a patient next to the landline phone).

Melanie Scott, Principal Clare Public School:

Most other schools within the state have had access to video conferencing services for well over 3 years. Our school had the hardware installed last term but it does not connect as we are a satellite school. (Appendix 2).

Delee and Jamie Fitzgerald:

High speed wireless broadband is not available at Clare Public School. Because there is no mobile phone service and hence no wireless broadband, children cannot participate in state wide programs such as 'connected classrooms'. Clare Public School requires wireless broadband technology to give the students the same educational benefits as their city counterparts.

Fleur Turner, President Balranald ICPA Branch

Remote children have the most to gain from programs that connect them to the outside world. Such technology should be implemented to remote schools as a first priority. Mobile phone technology would allow current hardware such as ipads, laptops and smartboards to be used to their full potential. In a busy classroom and home school environment, technology needs to be fast so that time spent on it is utilised fully for maximum educational benefit.

I personally have experienced these inadequacies as 30km East of us is the Mossgiel tower. By installing a yargi antenna we are able to access wireless broadband with the Big pond Elite Network Gateway and have instant access to the internet and by plugging in our mobile phone to the antenna can utilise our mobile service. However, 26km to the West from our house the Clare Public School is on satellite, there is a lot of time wasted spent trying to connect to the current internet service. The students and staff are continually frustrated and the ipads, smartboards and

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laptops are not being utilised to their full potential due to the lack of speed delivered via the current satellite service. Remote students should be able to access the same quality of technology as their city counterparts.

(Appendix 2)

DEVELOPMENTS IN THE TERRESTRIAL AND SATELLITE MOBILE PHONE SECTOR

Question 13. Have you been able to readily obtain information to improve your mobile phone coverage, such as using an external antenna or choosing particular phones that are better suited to rural or remote coverage?

Jim and Joy Harris:

Information is available but it is unusable. It was found to be totally inappropriate in the circumstances. Telstra were prepared to sell us the technology which had no likelihood of working.

Ministers send reams of info! Not of use!

Minto Pastoral Co:

In an area where coverage doesn't exist, no antenna or special 'rural phone' is going to be of any use. Antenna's only help pick up better coverage, in areas where coverage already exists. The telecommunication companies are very quick to sell you this technology citing improved reception, however, if the coverage isn't there in the first place, then there's no point whatsoever in having the 'extras'.

Peter Fuller, Balranald Tyres:

I have staff who regularly go out to those areas to change tyres on large machinery. I have spent hundreds of dollars on patch leads and car kits and they don't make a difference when in those areas. I even purchased a new mobile phone but later found it doesn't even support a patch lead.

Question 14. Are you aware of emerging technologies or initiatives that could be used to improve mobile phone coverage in regional Australia?

Jim and Joy Harris;

We continue to seek relevant information and welcome any improvements in coverage.

Question 15. What have been your experiences with satellite mobile phones?

Minto Pastoral Company:

MPC has operated with a satellite phone since they first purchased land in south-western NSW in 2004. This has been an 'emergency' phone carried in the manager's vehicle. There are many issues with this idea. Firstly, a satellite phone is large, cumbersome and heavy. It generally cannot be carried when someone is mustering by motorbike, which is how our staff muster. With three staff members working across three different locations spanning over 100km radius from each other, having one Satellite phone in one vehicle is really of no use at all. On the occasions the phone has been used, often it has failed. The connection could not be sought, due to cloud cover, other conditions or lack of battery power. In short, the Satellite phones cannot be relied on and are simply a backup and nothing else. Above all this, Satellite phones typically are more expensive than the average mobile phone to run, and a monthly fee is paid regardless of whether it is used or not. Incidentally, when it is used it, it's more expensive.

Claire and Shane Butler:

Satellite phones are a handy resource to have in an emergency but they are not feasible for everyday mobile phone use. For example, they cannot be used indoors, they do not have the same functions as say, a smart phone and they do not work in heavy cloud or in heavy smoke, such as a bushfire. At best, they are a useful tool to back up current communication needs, but they are not a long term solution when technology is advancing at such a rapid rate.

In an emergency situation, all means of communication should be available to us. In a bushfire the power will be out so UHF's will not work in the house, the sat phone won't work under heavy smoke, but the mobile might still work. Depending on where we are situated at the time will depend greatly on what means of communication to use. It's a well documented fact that lack of mobile phone coverage was one of the grievances aired at community consultations into the Black Saturday Fires. This is one of our biggest concerns too.

The reality is we have Next G phones that come into range when we go to town. We like Next G phones and we'd like to take full advantage of the technology they offer us, such as online networking and email, at much more affordable rates. A contractor who comes to do work on our farm will not purchase a Satellite phone just for that duration. Instead, he will reluctantly come out to do work, whilst his Next G message bank fills up with irate messages to greet him when he gets back to town. Its little wonder he doesn't want to come back to finish the job.

Shire workers have a satellite phone available to them when camping out. Again, these phones are mainly used for breakdowns and emergencies. Like the millions of workers around the country who travel away for work, our workers still need to have private chats with family and friends on their next G mobile. Instead Shire workers, shearers and other contractors have no real means of contacting their loved ones whilst working away during the week. This may have been acceptable some years ago, but communication is so instant now and it is a sad fact that the remote people of this country miss out on simple communication technology that is now second nature to city folk. It's also another reason why we can't get rural workers or why younger workers do not want to 'camp out' for work anymore.

CONSUMER ISSUES

Question 16. Are there any significant consumer issues specific to rural and remote communities that you consider are not being addressed?

Claire and Shane Butler:

10 years ago Telstra was the original company to roll out the Federal Government's 'Networking the Nation' internet satellites. Many rural people are not aware that the Government offers schemes to update that original satellite technology. These people are therefore still paying Telstra's unaffordable, overpriced satellite fees. Telstra should be obliged to explain that they are no longer considered an affordable choice by the government for satellite internet and no longer care about the provision of satellite internet services. They should also inform their satellite customers that there are now other companies offering metro comparable pricing on satellite internet connections, such as the offers under the new Interim Satellite Scheme.

Question 17. Do people in regional areas, particularly those in vulnerable or disadvantaged groups, have appropriate access to information about their consumer rights and the service options available to them?

Claire and Shane Butler:

Short answer: No. There are still overwhelming numbers of rural people who are not aware of the current NBN Co scheme and are still using the original internet satellites rolled out 10 years ago, paying enormous fees to Telstra.

Question 18. If not, what additional strategies could be put in place to assist individuals and groups to better understand their consumer rights and responsibilities?

Claire and Shane Butler:

There needs to be more advertising by the NBN Co aimed directly to rural people still on the old Telstra internet satellites.

Question 21. Are there any other issues relating to telecommunications services in regional Australia that you would like to bring to the committee's attention?

Recent events and tragedies in this area call for urgent action on implementation of mobile phone service:

Superintendent Michael O'Toole, Deniliquin LAC, NSW Police: (letter to Claire Butler)



NSW Police Force
www.police.nsw.gov.au
NSW Police Force
www.police.nsw.gov.au

ABN 43 408 613 180

Deniliquin Local Area
Command

14 November 2011

Ms Claire Butler
The Vale Station
BALRANALD NSW 2715

In response to your query regarding communication difficulties faced by police operating in remote areas around Balranald I am able to advise that in addition to the search you refer to (Death of Colin Armstrong, Hatfield 2011) police also encountered serious communications difficulties when attempting to investigate and or resolve the following matters:

Search for Missing Child on Property near Hay 9.3.2011 - 10.3.2011.

Response to light aircraft crash at Balranald 29.4.2011.

There was no mobile telephone coverage available in these areas. Had that been available the outcome of the matters would have been the same however we would have seen a more efficient and professional response to these matters. The Deniliquin Local Area Command would strongly support any moves to have greater coverage in the area you have identified.

I hope this assists.

Yours sincerely

Michael O'Toole
Superintendent
Deniliquin Local Area Command

Submission to the Regional Telecommunication Review Committee from the Hatfield and Clare Communities located within the Balranald Shire Council in South West New South Wales.

Alexandra Pippin:

During the recent search for our neighbour who had fallen off his motorbike and died the lack of mobile phone coverage made co-ordinating the search very difficult although UHF coverage was available extreme caution had to be used with what was said over this network as everyone could hear this and I feel it ultimately impacted on how this man's wife and mother were informed he was deceased and the amount of time that passed between him being located and the next of kin being notified.

Sylvia and Max Comitti, Graziers:

We had a house fire and due to there not being mobile phone service people onsite were unable to telephone for the assistance of the local Fire Brigade or local farmers and had to traverse to the closest farm to telephone for help. This created quite a considerable delay in taking action to extinguish the blaze and as a consequence our house burnt to the ground:

House Fire, The Ridge Station, Balranald Local Court Coroners Matter 4 of 2009

Police and Witness statements tendered to the Balranald Coroners Court state that they had extreme difficulty in raising the emergency alarm.

Excerpt from Statement of witness Lynden Stevens, House Fire at The Ridge Station, Clare 9/9/2009:

"I drove up onto the ridgeline just north of the house to get phone service. As I could not get any service I drove to the nearby property Min Min to call for assistance."

Statement from Sen Const Paul Ebsworth: "As there was no phone or radio reception at the property I drove to nearby 'Min Min' property and used the phone to contact Deniliquin Duty Officer and organised Crime Scene to attend...I then returned to 'The Ridge'."

Inspector Steve Walker, Rural Fire Service, Dareton

Operational coordination and management by all services would be greatly enhanced by the introduction of mobile phone coverage in this area and will be relied on more and more in the future.

Robert Rayner, Balranald VRA:

The Balranald Rescue Squad is concerned with the mobile coverage or lack thereof in the northern rural areas of the Balranald Shire.

As an emergency service we attend accidents and searches in this area and the lack of communication does hamper our efforts and the safety of the travelling public in this area.

We rely on satellite phones or radio communication both of which are not always carried by a majority of people.

The squad support this application to have communication improved in this area and urge that this be completed as soon as possible to ensure the safety of not only the local people but also visitors to the Shire including the world heritage area of the Mungo National Park.

Submission to the Regional Telecommunication Review Committee from the Hatfield and Clare Communities located within the Balranald Shire Council in South West New South Wales.

Alexandra Pippin:

In December one year we found a woman who had broken down on the road from Mungo National Park. She had been sitting beside the road in the extreme heat all day and no cars had come along, by evening when we found her she had been there for 11 hours and was distressed and anxious. Again mobile phone coverage would have meant she could have contacted someone to inform them of her situation. Another time my husband was checking sheep in a paddock and by chance found a family with 2 young children who had hit a ramp again on road from Mungo to Balranald, they were unable to drive the car and were stranded there, luckily no one had serious injuries from the accident but it was another situation when being able to use a mobile phone to ring for assistance would have been timely.

I am the mother of an autistic child who has walked off into the bush many times and we have been unable to locate him, Bill has no awareness of the dangers this could pose to him and no ability to judge weather extremes or distance. On at least four occasions we were unable to find him by ourselves and needed to call in the neighbours to assist in the search when he had been missing for too long and again mobile phone coverage would have greatly facilitated this as we could have contacted our neighbours more quickly to begin the search and also communicate where we had already searched for him.

Due to our children's special needs I am now forced to live in town during the school week to allow our son to attend a special needs school, this means my husband is left alone on our property all week attending to our stock, this involves using motorbikes, tractors and other heavy machinery and if an accident occurred it would be night time before we missed him and realized something was wrong as there is no mobile phone coverage.

Marg Butler:

A note of an incident that occurred during 2005. Actually there were a few over the years, but this one could have been avoided if there was a mobile service in the area.

It was approximately 7.00pm on a winters night. I had a flat tyre and had to wait for someone to come along and help as I couldn't get the nuts undone. Well that was o.k, I managed to change tyre and sent good Samaritans on their way not wanting to take up any more of their time as it was cold. I had been to Mildura a 6 hour round trip for a doctor's appointment therefore we stock up on groceries hence boot being full. I packed everything back in including flat tyre taking about half an hour and you wouldn't believe it, the car had a flat battery. I had no UHF radio due to flat battery and was out of range in any case. A mobile phone would have been a life saver.

My son was with me who has Fragile X Syndrome, an intellectual disability. We had no alternative but start walking the long trek home hoping my husband would come looking for us. Due to me often arriving home late after stopping off to visit family in Balranald he wasn't concerned and fell asleep. Toby and I walked **12-13 MILES!!!!** Not kms.

I can't begin to tell you the anger and frustration I was dealing with. Toby complained nearly all the way and ended up with extremely sore and blistered feet. Thank goodness it was a moonlit night as he is scared of the dark and insisted on carrying the torch himself.

I could go on, but really with technology today I just cannot believe that something has not been done in that area to improve service.

It is now 2011 and back in 2005 we were assured by Telstra that something was going to be done to improve coverage and nothing to this day has happened!

Sylvia Comitti:

My husband, Peter Maxwell Comitti, has diagnosed life threatening medical conditions (please refer attachment) whose life is at a far greater risk to an extreme degree without the access to a workable Mobile Telephone Service when he is actively operating & working on our farms. This is a deeply concerning situation for us both as the potential hazards & dangers on farms are limitless. My husband's safety & the safety of our employees & myself are of paramount importance to our well being & the successful/ & productive operation of our farming enterprise. The establishment of a Mobile Telephone Service in our area would contribute significantly in a life-threatening situation, as has been proven in past occurrences in our local community.

Jim and Joy Harris:

To the greatest degree possible, IT in regional and remote areas should be driven by a fair go for all rather than politics and every effort should be made to 'connect' us by the best method.

IT policy makers need to engage the agricultural sector in policy design and implementation.

Challenges are created by our distance from major centres and the fact that NBN cabling will not come to us.

Further, satellite connections provide only a compromised service (eg online auctions-AuctionsPlus.) This will necessitate dedicated R&D investment over an extended timeframe.

Daryl and Tanya Barrett, Transport Operators:

I also have occupational health and safety concerns for drivers in my employ - sending them out without mobile phone coverage also has its challenges in getting people to actually do the job for me.

My mother lives at Mayfield Station and often goes out to the paddocks on her own to check sheep. She has a mobile phone for when she visits town, but in this day and age it is only fair that the phone should also get range where she lives and works. It is a huge concern to me that I cannot contact her when she is out working.

Martin Greenham, Greenham Shearing:

An example of lack of communication occurred recently when my partner's mother was rushed to hospital.

Messages had been left but were not received for two days. This was very distressful for her. If mobile service was made obtainable it would make a lot of business's and families feel less isolated from everyone else.

Alan Lodge, Shire Overseer:

Is it possible to use some of the towers already out there on which to mount equipment? This would reduce the infrastructure costs for all services utilizing the towers.

Melanie Scott, Principal Clare Public School:

Our community has lost loved ones in motor vehicle accidents with no mobile phone access to emergency services. Life is precious how many more lives is it going to take until action is taken?

Submission to the Regional Telecommunication Review Committee from the Hatfield and Clare Communities located within the Balranald Shire Council in South West New South Wales.

Claire and Shane Butler:

Poor mobile phone reception was a significant factor in the Victorian Bushfire Commission inquiry – The reason for this inquiry was to learn how things went so wrong and how to avoid it happening again. We need all avenues of communications available to us because at any given time in an emergency a communication device can fall down. Satellite mobile phones will not work in dense smoke but a mobile phone will. UHF has only small range – all devices are needed in a life and property threatening emergency.

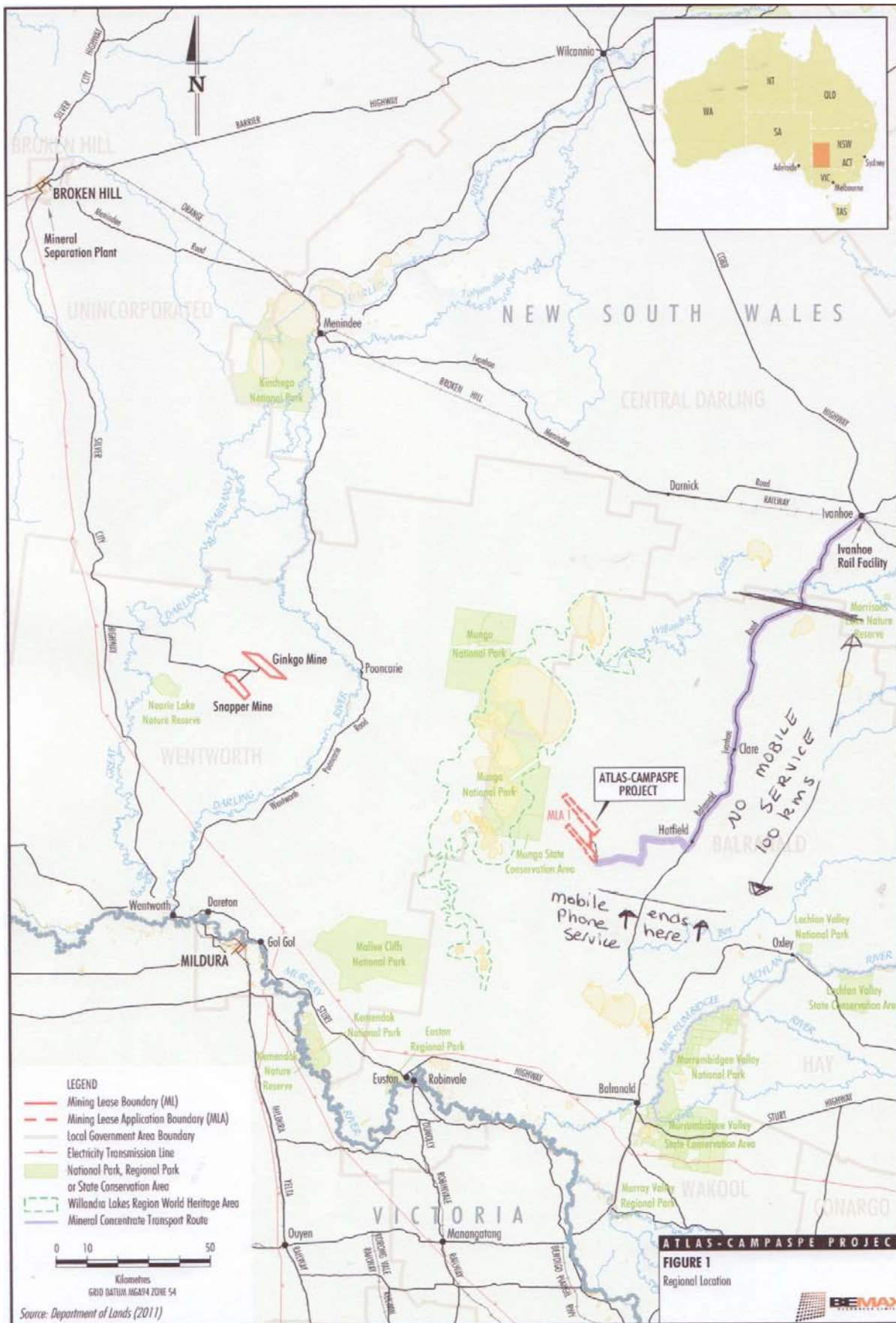
Submission to the Regional Telecommunication Review Committee from the Hatfield and Clare Communities located within the Balranald Shire Council in South West New South Wales.

APPENDICES:

Appendix 1: Map of Hatfield/Clare Area and proposed Bemax mine

Appendix 2: Aerial view of Clare Public School

APPENDIX 1:



APPENDIX 2:



Aerial view of Clare Public School.

Nearest small towns and Hospital: Ivanhoe, 75km dirt Road. Balranald 155km Bitumen Road.

Nearest Base Hospital: Mildura 310km.

This school has a Smart board, I pads and laptops. There is only satellite internet connection which is too slow for accessing in a classroom environment. Hardware therefore cannot be used to its full potential, to the detriment of the children's education.