

11 December 2011

2011-12 Regional Telecommunications Review Secretariat
Department of Broadband, Communications and the Digital Economy

Via Email: secretariat@rtirc.gov.au

Re: Issues Paper 2011-12 Regional Telecommunications Review

I live in the very small rural community of Clare in the Burdekin, North Queensland. I am 50kms from the nearest regional town, Ayr and 90kms for the nearest regional city, Townsville. I live in a telecommunications "black-spot" with no mobile phone or free-to-air television reception and my landline is currently out of service. Post Cyclone Yasi I was without telecommunications for 21 days. I pay \$90/month for Pay TV and \$120/month for Satellite Broadband. The segment of the 2011-12 Regional Telecommunications Review Issues Paper I wish to address is:

REGIONAL HEALTH AND EDUCATION OUTCOMES

Much focus has been placed recently, by the Department of Health & Ageing, on e-Health strategies for the future to address short-falls in services to rural and remote communities. As such, on-the-ground services in rural and regional communities such as the 'Better Access to Mental Health Services Initiative' have been cut so funding can be moved into the development of online programs. My position on the provision of e-Health services is the same as that of the National Farmers Federation:

"... while the NBN offers opportunities to deliver services remotely, we recognise that personal interaction is and will remain a key element in the delivery of a number of services, including aspects of health and social services. In this context it is important that information technology is used to complement and improve existing services, rather than being viewed as an opportunity to reduce costs and the level of resourcing. The potential negative impacts on communities and social capital in regional Australia as a consequence of a reduction in professional services should be avoided." (NFF Regional Telecommunications Review submission, p.4)

Personal Context:

Throughout 2011, I have been using *Social Media* as a means to raising awareness of rural mental health and issues facing people living in rural, remote and regional areas of Australia. During this time, I've come to learn there are certain aspects to living in a rural area that key policy makers are unaware of:

1. A lot of places in rural Australia don't have mobile phone reception. People in areas with mobile reception who want to phone me don't "get" that I won't be able to return their call until I am able to drive to a location **with** reception. If I was in crisis and needed to phone Lifeline for example, I would need to go halfway down the paddock to do so.
2. Due to circumstances beyond my control I don't currently have a working landline. Have you ever tried dealing with Telstra in an urban area for a technical issue? Now multiply that frustration by a million and you begin to get the picture for people in rural and remote areas. If a line drops out it can be weeks on end before the issue is resolved.
3. Even though the NBN is currently being rolled-out, not every rural and remote area in Australia will be getting it, they will have access to Satellite Broadband like me. Those based in metropolitan centres believe that satellite broadband will enable rural people to better communicate, for example via Skype. Satellite Broadband is wonderful ... **when it is working!** My service is so unreliable I never know when it will be up and when it will be down. Be it technical issues, atmospheric conditions, cloud cover, rain or even a gecko running around on the satellite dish, it drops in and out all day long. I get very distressed when I'm in the middle of a prearranged Skype conference and the signal drops out. Imagine if the appointment is with a psychiatrist as part of the government's new e-mental health initiative – the signal dropping out mid-session will only exacerbate the patient's condition, not help it.
4. The final issue remains in the uptake of technology: many people, particularly the elderly and those in Indigenous communities, have neither the financial means nor the ability to take advantage of mobile technology or online services. As such, online services should be provided to **compliment** on-the-ground services, not replace them.

Yours sincerely,

Alison Fairleigh,
Rural Mental Health Advocate.

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