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REGIONAL TELECOMMUNICATIONS REVIEW SUBMISSION

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I live in South Eastern NSW in a rural area located some 65 km to the nearest town that has a population approx 1200. My main reason for making this submission is to have the opportunity of highlighting the current state of failing/intermittent communications systems in rural and remote areas. I am concerned that country people & visitors are at risk every day that they do not have phone service and that country areas cannot grow either financially or in population size without working telecommunications in place.

I also have a social conscious and I sincerely believe that it is only a matter of time before there is a very real life-threatening situation in the area where I live and no quick form of telecommunications will be available to contact emergency services for help. With a minimum turn-around time of at least two hours drive to the nearest (small) hospital, time is of the essence and at least I will know that, through this submission, I have tried to make people aware of this situation.

Thank you to the organizers of this review for offering the general population an opportunity to make comment.

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?

I believe that improvements in telecommunications services have probably been greatly beneficial for the larger regional centres in Australia, however technological advances are slow to flow through to remote rural areas where residents struggle to have consistent phone service, either mobile or landline. The technology usually comes at a high price for rural consumers.

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

- A realistic and suitable plan for rural Australia that delivers to all residents in a timely fashion.
- Money, vision, and organisations/people who have a real understanding of and are passionately committed to improving the lives of rural Australians. There is a need for someone who is not afraid to authorize expenditure in rural and remote

areas thus allowing all Australians to have equality in access to quality landline and mobile phone service. Someone needs to stop shifting the blame for poor service and step up and take some responsibility to make improvements.

- Current telecommunication infrastructure has to be improved for every smaller rural community to improve general safety and so greater economic benefits can flow to both rural and larger regional centres. Until this is achieved any talk of new technology in the bush is merely ‘spin’ or ‘hype’ and could be decades away.
- Greater affordability – The cost of internet services, repairs/maintenance and keeping up-to-date with latest technology needs to be more affordable for those who live in rural and remote areas.
- Efficiency – any telecommunications needs to be able to operate with genuine efficiency in rural and remote areas. Near enough is not good enough.

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.

My families’ business is largely self employment in agriculture.

Connection to satellite internet & email service several years ago during a government subsidized campaign has seen significant savings in time and money with the availability of on-line services such as banking etc. Only a few years ago this was unavailable and was an all-day process to go to the bank in a larger regional centre and involved travelling hundreds of kilometers. This is even more relevant in rural areas now where most major banks have ‘left town’. It has allowed for quicker business invoicing and payment times.

It has also greatly improved decision making processes with the ability to easily compare purchase prices of equipment/parts etc and access to current markets and weather conditions, both of which are major deciding factors in the families’ business.

It should be mentioned that the Bureau of Meteorology site has been a terrific tool for our rural contracting business, with the Captains Flat Radar not far away the predictions are usually accurate for this area. Prior to internet connection there was no way of knowing long term weather predictions.

On a more personal level the residents of the local community that I live in have been better able to communicate with one another in the past few years with most of the population having access to email services. This is particularly relevant to this community which is socially isolated by distance, gravel roads that are not always in the condition we would like them to be in and occasional flooding of the Shoalhaven River

and its' tributaries cutting off access to the nearest towns which are located an hour's drive either to the north or south. There is no village, no local Community Notice Board and no local newspaper or newsletter. Organisers of events at the local hall, Rural Fire Brigade and Church are able to better communicate via email which has had the effect of making more people feeling included in the community and better knowledge of events in the district as well as being able to make contact with people that may not be otherwise easily contactable.

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.

- Government agencies usually have quite 'large' internet sites that take forever to download for those using slower internet connections or service 'drops out' temporarily – it can be far quicker and less frustrating to use the phone.
- Some government agencies, such as local government, do not always keep their on-line sites up-to-date with information. Often information is missing or months out of date.
- Larger government agencies often have information that is relevant to larger metropolitan areas or larger regional centres. Information pertaining to smaller districts is sometimes overlooked.

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?

- Landline telephone services must be updated to a reliable standard where all Australians have the opportunity to have phone service 24 hours a day and 7 days a week.
- Mobile phone services to be improved in rural and remote areas.
- Greater sponsorship/grants for schools in regional Australia for the purchase of new technology. So that children being educated in regional and rural Australia have the same education and employment opportunities as their 'city cousins'. The purchase of these technologies in many small schools (even those located just an hour's drive from the National Capital) can only take place after substantial fundraising ventures. It is very important that country children have access to new technology at school since it is simply not affordable for many families. I believe statistics would reveal that rural families have far less income to spend on such items than those families living in metropolitan areas. An example of this is from the Council area that I live in, Palerang. Census statistics from 2006 reveal that people living in communities on the western side of the Council area, close to Canberra and Queanbeyan, have an average family weekly income \$600 greater

than those who live just 1 hour s drive to the east in Braidwood and surrounds.
(this data is available on Palerang Council's website)

- More education and encouragement of older Australians as to the benefits of internet.

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?

The main barriers to the use of information and communications technologies in my local area are:

- Current landline infrastructure constantly requires repairing with service being intermittent and is therefore inefficient, unreliable and costly to business. An example of this from my own families' experience is where work contracts have been lost due to potential clients being unable to make contact because of no phone service. This has resulted in loss of income in a district where there are very few employment opportunities
- Mobile service is not available.
- Satellite internet service works most of the time but can become temporarily unavailable – which wreaks havoc when making financial transactions through the internet at the exact time of the 'drop out'. It is also an added cost and can be slow and time consuming.

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?

NO COMMENT

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

NO COMMENT

Question 9: Are there examples of the Internet being used by Indigenous Australians in ways that take advantage of economic, social or cultural opportunities?

I do not live in an indigenous community and therefore offer NO COMMENT

Question 10. What further initiatives should the committee consider to improve awareness within Indigenous communities of the opportunities provided by improved broadband services?

NO COMMENT

Question 11: What recommendations do you have for remote communities to take advantage of the progressive increase in availability of high-speed broadband?

- Any service in remote communities must be efficient, able to cope with local weather elements, affordable for rural families and tailored specifically for the needs of remote communities. Greater clarification is needed for this question in regards to what actually constitutes a 'remote community'.

Question 12: What more could be done to improve digital literacy amongst Indigenous Australians and within Indigenous communities?

NO COMMENT

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?

- I have been able to obtain information to improve mobile phone coverage – unfortunately mobile phone coverage is still non-existent in my local area and therefore the purchase of antennas, different phones has been a waste of time, effort and money. There is little hope of being able to receive mobile phone coverage in this area any time in the near future.

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

- Other than antennas and different phones, no.

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

I have not used satellite mobile phones & am put off by potential costs and voice delays involved. I have used a fixed satellite phone provided by Telstra at my home for a period of several months. There was significant time delay in conversation and a constant echo of one's own voice which created confusion and frustration. I would hope these issues have been addressed in current satellite mobile phones, I would be extremely reluctant to use any satellite phone until these problems are addressed.

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

- Landline faults are repaired only to reoccur within days/weeks. There appears to be no line updates or preventative measures taking place to address this issue. One wonders what the government's 'Grand Plan' might be for people living in the bush with these problems as much infrastructure is coming to the end of its life expectancy.
- No mobile phone coverage.

- Price of internet service and cost of 'keeping up -to-date' with computer technology and also the lack of & cost of computer specialists and repairs to equipment.
- Landline and equipment being prone to lightning strike.
- In regards to Satellite television there is no local content or advertisements for South-Eastern NSW, leaving already isolated viewers out of touch with local news and events.

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?

- From my own experience this information is usually conveyed over the phone by foreign telemarketers trying to convince me I will be able to get mobile phone service or better/cheaper/faster internet service if I take out a contract with their organization, and/or Telstra representatives who have difficulty speaking or understanding English. I have seen first hand how confusing and frustrating this is for the elderly and hard of hearing.

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?

NO COMMENT

Question 19: Are there specific cyber safety challenges that arise from the way that communications technologies are being used by regional, rural or remote communities?

- I would imagine there are specific cyber safety issues – one of the first being that people in regional, rural or remote communities are mostly honest, too trusting and not aware of potential scams and identity thefts and how to avoid them.

Question 20: How can education and awareness of the risks of using mobile devices, such as smartphones, be improved for consumers in regional areas?

- I would suggest better advertising in country newspapers, bill boards and local radio networks using examples of situations relevant to regional areas.
- Targeting schools through education or information pamphlets for parents. Often children know more than some adults in regards to modern technology. This is especially so in rural areas where parents & adults have not had access to new telecommunications technology.

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?

I would like to bring to the committee's attention the current state of poor infrastructure that exists in some parts of rural NSW, and for this section, more specifically the area where I reside in South East NSW.

My experiences with the Telstra Technicians is that they are usually pleasant, able to fix most faults within a few days and I have seen them committed to the job no matter heat, rain, or snow blizzards. However within days or weeks the same fault of the line 'dropping out' and having no dial tone reappears. This fault is made worse by wet weather. I am related to a number of locals and therefore know they experience similar situations. Since this issue has been occurring for over 10 years it would appear that there is definitely a problem with the local Area (Gundillion) Exchange and/or the underground cable, both of which I have been told need considerable updates but are unlikely to happen due to the large expense involved. Reporting these faults is difficult as there is no phone service when the fault occurs and no mobile phone coverage for approximately 45 km from home. The majority of faults are never reported as they have a tendency to 'come good' after a few days. It is also increasingly frustrating to be reporting phone faults to people who are based overseas and struggle with common English and concepts such as 'there is no mobile phone service' or 'I can not use my home phone because there is no dial tone'.

In regards to reporting faults there is a genuine issue of not being able to get phone calls diverted to another number unless the owner of the phone speaks directly to Telstra. This is difficult when the owner has asked a neighbour or friend to report the fault. I understand there are legal issues at play here but could Telstra not have a list of 'authorised representatives' nominated by the owner for these cases where faults continually re-occur? This is time consuming, frustrating and if phone numbers can't be diverted it ultimately results in loss of employment for people who are self-employed.

I would like to see infrastructure in rural and remote areas updated sooner rather than later. I, along with other district residents are concerned that our local Telstra Technician is nearing retirement age and we wonder what our communications system will degenerate to when he is no longer available.

Improved communications would be more encouraging for younger families to move to or continue residing in rural areas. I am aware of one young family in this district who made plans to move to the area but ultimately were not able to because they did not have mobile phone service and therefore could not run their business satisfactorily from this area. Services in rural areas are currently 'numbers based' and it is increasingly difficult to retain services, such as school bus runs, mail service etc when the general population is put off by the lack of communication services.

It is simply not good enough that young families and older residents (some who are unable to drive) are putting up with intermittent phone service. Basic telephone communications in rural areas should be a right and are absolutely vital in emergencies and particularly for those:

- people suffering illness
- isolated residents living alone who do not see another person from week to week
- working in isolated areas

- elderly residents with no physical support
- with young children who are educated a long distance away from their home, or with partners who have to travel long distances to work.
- trying to conduct business without having to leave home

At a recent First Aid training course undertaken at the local (Gundillion) Hall participants were so concerned about the lack of adequate local communication services that they discussed strategies for communication in the event of an emergency. Unfortunately these strategies rely heavily on someone answering an emergency call on a UHF radio. We are thankful for UHF radio. There was much discussion about past emergency events in the area where help has ultimately been delayed because of the lack of available communication services.

It would appear that there is an attitude of - if you live in the bush you can't expect to have the same service as everyone else – but you can pay the same amount or more for a service that's not guaranteed to work.

Thank you for your time
Chauntelle Hindmarsh