

*Pastoralists' Association*  
*of West Darling*

INDUSTRIAL UNION OF EMPLOYERS

Registered under the Fair Work (Registered Organisations) Act and the NSW Industrial Relations Act.



Submission

25/11/11

Regional Telecommunications Review Submission

The Pastoralists' Association of West Darling (PAWD) is an agri-political lobby organization looking after the special interests of landholders in the Western Division of New South Wales. PAWD members and their businesses are principally involved in the production of wool, sheep, cattle and goats. These primary production businesses support and are supported by many remote and rural centres which provide health services, education facilities, labour, business supplies and services. With this in mind, the questions posed by the Review panel are answered on behalf of the PAWD members.

**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?**

The improvement of ICT is allowing (with further improvements as addressed in question 2) businesses to conduct correspondence (B2B, B2C) electronically instead of by mail, of which the service for most members is weekly. With gradual improvement of mobile phone coverage, more business can be conducted onsite rather than in the office. With patchy phone coverage at present, it is still more of a novelty to conduct business onsite. For many members, it works at times, but not reliably enough to rely on, which creates frustration for users.

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Improved Internet availability to properties is now allowing businesses to perform online activities, which city counterparts were doing 15 years ago, but the current standard of Internet service falls far behind that of which is available in cities.

Any businesses with Internet sites must have sites hosted on servers in capital cities or overseas to ensure connection speeds are as fast as possible. Members are unable to have their own server onsite because the slow download/upload speeds. The severe restriction on package sizes (which has only recently increased from 10MB to 15MB) is still too small to operate an isolated station business located outside of a major rural centre with NBN access.

The restriction and cost of data upload/download (Mb's per month) also hampers diversification and doesn't allow for any gains in business efficiency or innovation. Members' mail boxes' for example, have limited online storage size, severely hampering online meetings, negotiations etc. Many city businesses would struggle if they had the same restriction on their data upload and download capacity. Our email mailbox capacity needs to be increased.

Improving Internet and phone connections is giving rural children the opportunity of better schooling. The upgrade of School Of The Air (SOTA) communications from HF radio to online classes in the last few years is an example. This is a great aid for governesses and parents who are putting their children through home schooling because of distance from schools.

Rural Health services are benefiting from improvements in ICT. The availability of patient electronic health records for Royal Flying Doctor Service (RFDS) doctors at remote clinics is a good example. As the existing system is becoming increasingly overloaded and the fact that data is second to voice, the benefits are disappearing because of greatly increased download/upload

time. The current country cell towers are overloaded because of increase of usage by travelers with data hungry devices passing through on the major highways (they do have a right to do this but the cell towers cannot cope). Please refer to the RFDS South Eastern Section NBN Submission dated August 2011 for a detailed review of the current shortfalls the existing system has for Healthcare in Regional and Remote areas.

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

The biggest factor currently stifling the benefits for members of the new ICT is the unreliability of the current telecommunications system. There are properties that have not had basic telephone services for many weeks because technical faults are not being fixed. For employers to comply with OH&S requirements in case of an accident, medical help needs to be available. It is simply not possible to contact emergency services if the telephone system is not working. Without a reliable telephone service, business activities are also very hard to conduct.

Mobile phone coverage is still very poor or non-existent for many members. An increase in mobile phone coverage through installation of more towers and increasing capacity of existing towers should be a priority. Development of proven handsets specifically suited to remote operating conditions and more reasonably priced external antennas to improve the range of handsets would increase the benefits of ICT.

For primary production businesses to benefit from Internet opportunities available, Internet speed and data plans need to be available at similar prices to city counterparts. An example of this disparity is as follows: a 15GB plan PAWD members have access to is \$79.95 with claimed speeds of 2-40 Mbps (members report 1-2Mbps), versus capital city residents with access to ADSL or cable pay \$69.95 for 200GB with speeds claimed to be 20-30Mbps (source: <http://go.bigpond.com/broadband/?ref=Net-Head-Int-Plans-Broadband>, accessed 11<sup>th</sup> oct 2011).

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**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.**

PAWD members' businesses are within the agriculture sector. In line with current business practice, members' businesses are becoming more reliant on electronic media such as Internet and mobile phones. The unreliability of services currently available to members has large financial costs to their businesses. Members wish that the services provided be at least reliable and somewhat similar to that enjoyed by city counterparts. There is great resistance in taking advantage of the new technologies available because of the reliability issues and the costs incurred when the service malfunctions.

An example of a system that is currently available, but unable to be used in this area is remote telemetry. This technology allows monitoring of remote sites from a centralized base station thus reducing time, labour and management costs whilst managing the remote sites continuously. This technology uses the radio phone network, which in its current form is unsuitable to reliability utilize this technology.

**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.**

The principle of online government services is great. In practice, this is not the case. Government sites such as Centrelink and Roads and Traffic Authority (RTA) are complicated and hard for less 'computer-savvy' people with a slow internet connection to navigate. Most members don't have the time to find the information they are seeking from the particular web site. Slow internet connection, expensive data downloads and complex websites mean government sites tend to be avoided in preference to using telephone assistance.

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**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?**

- Increased reliability of Internet and telephone services.
- The cost of ICT for rural and remote users be similar to that of our city counterparts.
- Improved coverage for mobile phones.
- Improved 'all weather' access roads to country cell towers to allow speedy maintenance and repairs when faults occur (members currently lose all basic phone services for weeks when access to towers is cut due to rain).
- Improved data/voice capabilities of all towers to service the increasing demand.

The ITC system for the 7% of users outside the NBN area needs to have the capacity to allow these users to be able to interact with the other 93% of users with access to NBN.

**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?**

It is good that major regional centres are receiving upgraded technologies, but if the people they deal with don't also have the same technical capabilities, the technology is unusable. An example of this is a virtual School Of The Air classroom. The teacher can have Internet capabilities to run virtual conferencing, but if students don't, then it cannot happen.

The greatest single barrier is the disparity between hi tech NBN systems servicing major rural centers, and the outdated and almost obsolete ICT systems available for remote residents. Every time new technologies are introduced through our telecommunications providers, the rollouts take so long that they are obsolete by the time installations are completed.

Another barrier is the unreasonable pricing of Internet packages for uploading and downloading data. We are severely disadvantaged by this (see question 2).

**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?**

High speed broadband would improve the delivery of education through allowing virtual classrooms for home schooled children in remote areas. This would give all students more access to help from qualified teachers instead of, at present, limited time on teleconferences with teachers, with most help coming from parents and governesses (which most have limited or no teaching qualifications or training).

Remote and rural healthcare would be greatly improved with reliable high speed broadband. Please refer to the RFDS South Eastern Section NBN submission, August 2011 for a detailed review of the current shortfalls the existing system has for healthcare in regional and remote areas, and also refer to the RFDS South Eastern Section Future IT Requirements submission, July 2011, for what is required to improve healthcare services delivery.

**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.**

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

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

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

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

**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?**

This information is not readily available. The maps of coverage listed on the Internet are not accurate and phone assistants are not trained satisfactorily in what products work in what areas. Members have been sold devices by telemarketers that supposedly work in specified areas but do not. Associated costs of the product then needs to be recouped which is not always easy from Telco's.

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

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

Experience by members of Satellite mobile phones is very poor. They have proven to be unreliable and expensive. This has been to the extent that the Wild Dog Destruction Board (WDDDB) has had to install its own HF radio network along the length of the Dingo Exclusion Fence to cover OH&S requirements for its employees.

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

- The size and the price of Internet packages, which are not in line with our city or costal counterparts.
- The lack of mobile phone coverage stopping business from operating efficiently and in the same manner as our city cousins.
- The insufficient data transfer speeds currently available.
- The lengthy waiting periods for technicians to repair ongoing faults that can't be repaired remotely.
- Members' telecommunications services cost more, and deliver less.

**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?**

**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?**

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

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

**OTHER ISSUES**

**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?**

The construction of the Silverton Wind farm with 160 metre high towers is going to interfere with mobile coverage and fixed station phone services. This is because radio repeater tower signals have to cut directly through the electronic noise from the wind farm towers to reach the receivers. This will affect all phones and wireless devices in the vicinity of the wind farms.

Thanking you for the opportunity to make a submission.



Mrs Sue Andrews,  
President.