

*Robert and Georgie Somerset*

*Somerset Trading Company*

*Kingaroy, Qld 4610*

## **Submission to the**

## **Regional Telecommunications Independent Review Committee**

Email - [secretariat@rtirc.gov.au](mailto:secretariat@rtirc.gov.au)

In this submission we have addressed some of the questions raised in the RTIRC Issues paper, and outlined the opportunities available and challenges we face. We have not addressed every area, but believe addressing the ones we raise would benefit e-health access for all and opportunities for indigenous people in our regions.

### **Introduction**

We have a beef cattle business based in Queensland's South Burnett. We are located 95km west of Kingaroy near the village of Durong. This submission covers issues we face in our business, as well as some being faced by our community organisations and peers in our community.

Our involvement at an executive level locally extends across several educational, industry, emergency service and sporting organisations.

Our current use of telecommunications in our home and business include:

- Landline phone
- 2 mobile phones
- 3G internet connection with non directional aerial access (15GB/ month)
- 2 telemetry watering points
- Wifi in office and home to enable laptop, tablet and iPad use

We rely extensively on telecommunication, accessing email and the internet daily in our business and personal life.

### **Digital Economy**

We currently utilise a range of tools related to the digital economy and have done for many years. These include:

- Fully integrated online banking – downloading bank statements into accounting software for reconciliation and uploading accounts for payment
- Accessing webinar for training, professional and personal development
- Online tools including research, internet purchasing and comparative analysis.
  - For example, when rebuilding machinery, research and purchase of parts can be completed online – both domestically and internationally

*Robert and Georgie Somerset*

*Somerset Trading Company*

*Kingaroy, Qld 4610*

*Restriction on our engagement with the digital economy is around the data speed and capacity of 3G and the continued reliance on satellite technology.*

### **Barriers to engagement in the Digital economy**

If the only internet option is satellite technology, the ability to effectively engage is restricted due to the nature of the upload/ download and the increased use of 'data packaging' as files increase in size and complexity. With data packages on offer being quite small and expensive (eg Bigpond satellite – 2GB per month = \$249.95 or 4GB = \$499.95 vs Bigpond broadband of 500GB = \$49.95) software upgrades, the use of smart phones and accessing anything data rich (eg wmv files for education etc) will be prohibitively expensive and difficult to implement.

We understand that there is evidence that the satellite 'lag' time prevents effective use of cloud computing, as the packaging of the data does not work effectively with the cloud, causing re-starts of transmission – this will impact on users ability to access tools such as icloud, dropbox and other cloud based systems, which appear to be the future of the digital economy.

This impact will only grow as the reliance on technology increases and regional people restricted to satellite access are not able to enjoy the same flexibility as those on broadband.

### **Communicating with Government**

We are actively involved in engagement with various levels of Government, both at a strategic (board) level for state and national Government, through to local organisations.

We utilise telecommunications services to do this – emails with notification of opportunities to have input, being the main one, however social media is also a key factor in this.

We believe email is absolutely critical for effective communication however we are concerned that websites are now becoming quite difficult to navigate and find the information unless you have the specific link.

- *Recommendation:*

- *That Government websites align with best practise communication and have very clear, easy to navigate entry pages*
- *Continue to utilise internet for engagement but offer a range of ways to interact (as this submission process has done)*
- *Provide adequate time for people to access, read and engage*
- *Don't dispense with face to face community engagement*

*Robert and Georgie Somerset*

*Somerset Trading Company*

*Kingaroy, Qld 4610*

## **Education and Training**

We have accessed training online through webinar and online resources. Although this provides access to many resources and is a very effective tool, there are limitations which must be kept in mind.

This includes line speed (difficult on satellite connection to see lectures, videos and other resources) and an understanding of the way people learn.

We are also very concerned about rural and regional state school's increased reliance on telecommunications:

- Education Queensland will be implementing the National Curriculum in 2012 and our understanding is that this will be largely delivered digitally (with very little text book support). This will involve being online in class time and downloading resources. Already our small school (Durong South State School - 39 students) has difficulty accessing this curriculum as we have satellite technology not capable of packaging the data in the appropriate way.
- If the education system is reliant on a digital national curriculum, ensure the hardware is in place to deliver this in an equitable manner to all young Australians.
- Telecommunications can only be used to improve education in rural and regional areas if:-
  - a) The hardware (technology) is able to deliver it effectively
  - b) The professional development is in place to ensure classroom staff are equipped to deliver something digitally.
  - c) Places of education are adequately resourced to have the equipment on the ground for students

*Recommendation – Rural and regional school telecommunications infrastructure be upgraded to access the digital curriculum effectively to ensure equitable access.*

## **Challenges**

Problems we have faced in our community using telecommunications services:-

- Poor mobile reception across our district - we are unable to rely on mobile phones for safety or communication. There is a large portion of highway in the area with no coverage. No mobile coverage is possible at bushfire callouts, or for automatic river height readings, creating safety hazards for road users.
- We do not have experience as consumers of satellite phones as the cost is too great.

*Robert and Georgie Somerset*

*Somerset Trading Company*

*Kingaroy, Qld 4610*

- In January 2011 floods – our landline was for several days more than once out due to lack of energy solutions for local exchange. Telstra were unable to access the exchange due to flooded roads, but their systems were unable to allow a locally available generator to be used to reinstate landline connection for district.

Lack of maintenance of the systems allowed this to happen. Telstra is now not geared for communities without mobile reception, as their solution for our lack of communication was to provide free re-direction to a mobile service. This is of little value when you do not have reliable mobile coverage.

- Cost and speed of internet access. We have now installed an aerial to access 3G internet reception – this is not possible for most people and many rely on satellite technology.
- Satellite is not only unable to cope with high volume internet (or ‘cloud’ computing) it is also expensive and high volume packages are not available.
- *Recommendation –*
  - *a higher penetration of 4G towers in regional areas to enable both voice and data reception to overcome both poor mobile coverage and satellite internet reliance. This would address a range of safety, education, digital economy and equitable access issues.*

## **Resolving Problems**

We find having a relationship with Telstra Countrywide enables us to access a higher level of decision making and reporting, as we find call centre and help lines don’t understand our community’s issues and the lack of access to mobile technology.

Consistently, call centre staff are unable to comprehend the isolation and issues we face, and when it is to do with landline outage, as happens with some regularity on one district exchange (Chahpingah) the staff do not understand there is no mobile reception. This can be extremely irritating when it is ongoing.

There are many specific problems faced by people living in rural and remote areas – the cost of access, inability to access mobile reception, we are not able to access high volume/ low cost internet plans, we are not able to utilise things such as 1c texting, or mobile bundles, as we don’t have the mobile reception.

These issues do become compounding at times, and certainly limit uptake of some forms of technology such as smartphones, digital innovation, and productivity enhancements such as telemetry systems

*Robert and Georgie Somerset*

*Somerset Trading Company*

*Kingaroy, Qld 4610*

People living in rural and regional areas find out about their rights by having local activist who finds the information and shares it (usually by email, sometimes mainstream media). They contact their industry body, local councillor, community advocate or community organisation.

The increased use of smartphones will bring with it a range of challenges and opportunities – we suggest working with community groups, industry bodies respected regionally and also women’s organisations and networks in each state (eg Qld Rural Women’s Network [www.qrwn.org.au](http://www.qrwn.org.au) ) as rural and regional women have been identified as early adopters of technology and often communicate and advocate locally for change.

We do not believe the NBN will enhance telecommunications in our area. We have a very high usage of email and internet in the area, with all local communications conveyed this way, including publications such as the school newsletter and bowls club news.

There remains many ‘black spots’, hence our earlier recommendation regarding 4G towers.

### **Conclusion**

We welcome the opportunity to outline these issues for you, and the resolutions we see. We live with these challenges on a daily basis. They impact on our business and our daily life.

We operate a sustainable, multi generational business that will see the fourth generation integrated into its ranks in the next five years.

By improving access to a reliable, affordable and equitable telecommunications system, the lives of people across our whole community will be improved.

We look forward to reading your recommendations, and would welcome the opportunity to discuss any of the issues we have raised in this submission with the committee.

Robert and Georgie Somerset

11 December 2011