

Submission by The



In response to

Department of Broadband, Communications and the Digital Economy

2011-12 Regional Telecommunications Review

December 2011

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INTRODUCTION

South Australian Farmers Federation

The South Australian Farmers Federation (SAFF) is South Australia's peak agricultural organisation representing farmers across South Australia. As an agri-political group, SAFF's aim is to assist South Australian farmers and their rural communities achieve sustainable profitability by providing representation, leadership and services to members. By lobbying governments, SAFF has been able to achieve changes in legislation that promotes farming interests and the rural communities where they live and work. SAFF works to generate greater understanding and awareness of farming's role, contribution and value to the South Australian economy. It also works to ensure that our farming communities continue to play a key role in the development and sustainability of our state as well as their own livelihoods.

2011-12 Regional Telecommunications Review

The South Australian Farmers Federation (SAFF) is pleased that the Regional Telecommunications Review Committee as part of the 2011-12 Review is interested in the consumer concerns of people and businesses in regional, rural and remote Australia.

In surveying the SAFF membership, the telecommunications issues that were highlighted were the difficulties in the changeover to digital TV, the continuing lack of mobile coverage in some areas, and access to satellite signals.

In relation to the National Broadband Network, there is anticipation that this will improve access to the internet which will assist farmers improve their business efficiencies and opportunities, as well as allowing rural communities better access to health services, with for example the establishment of telehealth centres.

Difficulties in the changeover to digital TV

With the switch to digital TV, many farmers in South Australia found that they needed to also change to satellite to maintain or to improve reception. It has been so frustrating that some have even asked “Why replace an existing one with an inferior one if it hasn’t had the problems sorted out?”

SAFF wrote to the Minister for Broadband, Communications and the Digital Economy on this issue and received a very unsatisfactory response from one of the Minister’s advisers (copies attached). There appears to be no recognition of the issues raised or an understanding of conditions in rural areas.

One of SAFF’s members eventually gave up, and paid \$1000 for his own satellite disc. He found that the local electrician was not able to handle the installation as a “registered installer” was required, even though he was told the closest one was over 100 km away. He also found that there was more required than just buying a set-top box and yet there was no advise on this offered.

Continuing lack of mobile coverage

This issue was raised from across the State and particularly in the Keilira, Avenue Range and Reedy Creek districts in the South East of South Australia.

While the comments were made mainly about the continuing blackspots where mobiles do not work or continually drop out, there were comments on the expanding need for mobile phones not just for phone calls but for internet access.

It was also noted that when farm accidents occur, often the usually elderly male farmer is working by himself on an isolated part of the farm where even his wife may only have a vague awareness of his whereabouts. Having a mobile phone that works may be the difference between living and an agonising death.

Access to satellite signals

Farmers are moving into Precision Agriculture using Global Navigation Satellite System (GNSS) technology. Unfortunately expansion is limited by both the availability and affordability of high resolution satellite imagery from a number of commercial providers.

The United States and Russia are planning updates to their systems, while the European Union and China are planning to launch their own systems. This will significantly improve the accuracy and robustness of satellite navigation.

It is essential that Australian farmers also have access to this new and developing technology. There are concerns over the reliability and availability of satellite signals, signal degradation and geographic limitations associated with receiving signals from a single point.

While the Victorian Government has been active in expanding its GNSS Continuously Operating Reference Station Network into regional Victoria, there is a need for a coordinated approach across the rest of Australia.

Other issues

There were several other issues raised:

- difficulties in getting internet access,
- can only use dial-up, and
- with digital radio cannot access ABC regional radio.

There was also concern at the media reports that towns smaller than 1000 people will not be able to access the National Broadband Network, and questions about where does this leave farmers on individual properties?

Telehealth centres

SAFF is working with the Australian Institute of Male Health & Studies which is proposing to establish telehealth centres, initially in rural South Australia. These centres will specifically provide mental health and counselling services through the use of webcams. These will be aimed at ensuring that there is access to healthy lifestyle advice, counselling, psychological therapy, and mental health support services for men in rural and remote communities. Rural men are at greater risk of suicide and mental health disorders than their city counterparts.

While this program will be largely self-sustaining, there is a need for both funding for the roll-out and the need for sites with adequate, reliable telecommunications capabilities. This must include in the event of a data line/transmission failure, access for the practitioners of audio mobile capacity using their computer tablets, so that sessions can be rounded-off.



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23 June 2011

Senator the Hon Stephen Conroy
Minister for Broadband, Communications and the Digital Economy
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Dear Senator Conroy

Re: Digital TV

With the switch to digital TV, many farmers in South Australia are finding that they need to also change to satellite to maintain or to improve reception.

Some country areas of South Australia switched to digital TV late last year, and since then the South Australian Farmers Federation has received several complaints from members particularly about poor service and patchy reception.

One member found that there was a lack of communications, when the 1300 number was rung the staff knew nothing, there was a lack of registered installers of satellites, and he is still not aware of the cost.

The Government is to be congratulated for the Satellite Subsidy Scheme, as access to TV is often more beneficial in country areas than in the cities. However I wish to bring these difficulties to your attention in the hope that these can be rectified before the rest of the switchover happens in South Australia.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'Carol Vincent'. The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

Carol Vincent
CHIEF EXECUTIVE



OFFICE OF SENATOR THE HON STEPHEN CONROY

MINISTER FOR BROADBAND, COMMUNICATIONS AND THE DIGITAL ECONOMY
MINISTER ASSISTING THE PRIME MINISTER ON DIGITAL PRODUCTIVITY
DEPUTY LEADER OF THE GOVERNMENT IN THE SENATE



Ms Carol Vincent
Chief Executive
South Australian Farmers Federation
PO Box 6014
HALIFAX STREET SA 5000

Dear Ms Vincent

Digital television reception, VAST, Satellite Subsidy Scheme

Thank you for your letter dated 23 June 2011 to the Minister for Broadband, Communications and the Digital Economy, Senator the Hon Stephen Conroy, on behalf of members of the South Australian Farmers Federation, concerning digital television reception in regional and rural South Australia, the Viewer Access Satellite Television (VAST) service and the Satellite Subsidy Scheme. The Minister has asked me to respond on his behalf.

The Australian Government understands the importance of free-to-air television to regional and rural Australians and has introduced policy and legislative measures to maximise viewers' access to digital television services. Providing equal television services to viewers in regional, rural and remote Australia is a central feature of the government's digital switchover program.

Digital switchover in regional South Australia

As you may be aware, the digital television switchover has already been implemented in some regional South Australian switchover areas – Broken Hill, Riverland, Mt Gambier/South East South Australia and Spencer Gulf – which switched to digital-only broadcasts on 15 December 2010. However, there are some areas of regional South Australia which are located in the Remote Central and Eastern Australia digital switchover area, which will switch to digital only-broadcasts in the second half of 2013. The actual date that the switchover will occur in the six-month period will depend on factors including local conditions and community feedback. Furthermore, some areas of regional South Australia may be located in the Adelaide switchover area which will switch to digital-only broadcasts on 31 December 2013.

It is important for viewers to understand which switchover area they are located in, as this will determine the timing of access to possible new terrestrial digital services where they reside, as well as their eligibility to access the VAST service and the Satellite Subsidy Scheme.

Information about switchover

Your members can find information about which switchover area they are located in, as well as frequently updated information about local television services, the frequencies they are transmitted on, and the expected coverage of the transmitter serving local areas from *mySwitch* on the Digital Ready website. *mySwitch* is a web-based tool which has been developed by the Digital Switchover Taskforce to provide all the information viewers will need to prepare for switchover in their area. Viewers can access *mySwitch* by going to www.digitalready.gov.au and following the links.

It is recommended that your members first enter their address into *mySwitch*, which will provide them with accurate digital switchover information for their circumstances, including the expected quality and channel selection of digital television services for their specific address, which may be very different for a location only a small distance away. It is important to understand that the way that your members can overcome their reception difficulties will vary because each household's situation is dependent on their specific location and reception equipment.

mySwitch also provides viewers with information about new transmitters being established in viewers' areas. It is important to note however, that the decision whether or not to rollout additional transmitters is a commercial matter for broadcasters. In making this decision, broadcasters will take into account factors such as the size of the population in the predicted coverage area of the new transmitter and the technical and commercial viability of the transmitter.

mySwitch will provide viewers with information about the current digital channels available from the transmitters that serve the area in which they live, as well as the expected additional digital services which may be added to these existing transmitters. Some of your members may find that are able to access some, but not all of the digital services. This is because there are some transmission sites in regional and rural South Australia where broadcasters have yet to roll out new digital services.

mySwitch will also provide information about whether viewers are eligible to access the VAST service and whether they will be eligible to access the Satellite Subsidy Scheme in order to assist them in receiving their digital television services by way of satellite.

Obstructions to television signals

Without details about your members and their specific circumstances I am able to provide only a general response about possible solutions to reception problems. I hope that the following information may assist you.

If your members live in areas where *mySwitch* indicates good coverage, but are still unable to receive adequate digital television services, then there are a number of factors which may explain their reception difficulties.

Factors that can lead to poor reception of digital television services can include signal obstructions, such as the local terrain, foliage, and nearby buildings and trees. Reception may also break up or 'pixelate' because of old or poorly calibrated television reception equipment such as antennas, weather conditions, an inadequate or excessive signal, or because of 'impulse noise' interference caused by electrical equipment and appliances. An Australian Government Endorsed Antenna Installer will be able to assess your members' television reception equipment and advise on the best type of setup for their particular circumstances.

If there are large trees around your members' homes this can also affect television reception. Because of signal absorption by trees surrounding houses, some householders need to install a high-gain antenna, low loss cable and a mast-head amplifier to boost the received signal to a satisfactory level. Some households may also need to increase the height of their antenna in order to overcome terrain obstructions.

Steps to improving reception

The first step that your members may wish to consider for improving their reception is to rescan their set-top boxes or tuners. To do this, they should follow the instructions in the manufacturer's manual. They may need to rescan more than once to tune in to all the available services in their area.

Viewers in some areas may find that auto-scanning their set top box or digital TV for available channels may result in tuning to a service which does not provide the best reception. This is because, during autoscans, channel numbers will be allocated to the first (that is, the lowest) radiofrequency channel that is found, regardless of the quality of the signal. This is stored as the logical channel number for the service. Other channels for the same service being broadcast from other transmitters in the area will be stored somewhere else, typically in the channel range 300–400. If you have used autoscans to store your channels, you can use the channel up button to find the duplicate channels which are stored elsewhere and decide which is the best channel to watch.

If your members have not already done so, they should also check their antenna system, to the extent that they are able, for any loose or ill-fitting connections or plugs.

If these measures do not improve reception, then they may consider engaging an Australian Government Endorsed Antenna Installer to check their installation and ensure the antenna is properly configured to receive the digital signals available in their area.

An Australian Government Endorsed Antenna Installer should be able to measure analog and digital television signal levels at your members' homes and recommend ways to improve television reception. The installer should also be able to offer advice about antenna selection, positioning, orientation and choice of correct cables, connectors and distribution equipment.

It is important to engage an installer experienced in analog and digital television reception; able to measure television signal levels at a residence as a basis for recommending ways to optimise reception.

A list of local Government Endorsed Antenna Installers is available through *mySwitch* on the Digital Ready website.

Viewer Access Satellite Television (VAST) service

Viewers in remote Australia, or viewers who live in regional/metropolitan areas who are unable to receive adequate terrestrial television reception from the transmitters that serve the area in which they live will be able to receive their digital television services through the new government-funded VAST service.

The VAST service will also be available to people who currently rely on a self-help facility that is not converted to digital by commercial broadcasters and who are not able to receive an adequate digital signal from another transmitter serving their area.

The government is investing \$375.4 million over twelve years to provide transmission of digital free-to-air television services from the new VAST platform.

The government's aim in the switchover process is to address, as much as possible, long-standing issues in regional and remote areas of Australia which have left residents with poor or in some cases no access to terrestrially broadcast television services.

It is important to understand that the free-to-air commercial television broadcasters are not obliged to establish new terrestrial digital transmitters or provide their services to every part of their licence area and it is not technically feasible or financially viable for them to roll out terrestrially delivered services to every household in Australia. The extent to which the commercial broadcasters upgrade or establish terrestrial transmitters is a matter for their commercial judgement.

The establishment of the VAST service aims to ensure that anyone in Australia that cannot receive digital terrestrial services will have access to a reliable and professionally-operated free-to-air service now and into the future. The VAST service is a first class direct-to-home digital television satellite service that employs cutting edge transmission technology: it provides a high quality level and range of services equivalent to that delivered in metropolitan and larger regional areas, and its signal covers the entire Australian continent.

The VAST service is provided by Eastern Australia Satellite Broadcasters Pty Ltd, which is a joint venture company owned by Imparja Television and Southern Cross Media.

The VAST service provides the same number of television channels available in capital cities. It features channels carrying programs sourced from Southern Cross Seven, Imparja Nine and the Ten network, and the main national broadcaster services, ABC1 and SBS ONE, together with digital SD channels ABC2, ABC3, SBS TWO, 7TWO, GO!, and Eleven, and the high definition channels ABC News 24 HD, SBS HD, 7mate (Seven HD), GEM (Nine HD), and ONE HD (Ten HD).

The service also provides viewers with access to the local regional news services currently broadcast by the commercial broadcasters in their relevant terrestrial licence areas. Viewers in regional South Australia will be able to access the local news services of WIN Mt Gambier as well as the regional service of Southern Cross SA, as well as the local news services of other areas of regional Australia. These news services are provided through dedicated news channels which can be accessed by pressing 4 on the viewer's remote control and then selecting the appropriate service for their location. The news services of the national broadcasters, the ABC and the SBS, are also provided. ABC news is provided through ABC1 on a state basis, so viewers in regional South Australia will be able to receive ABC1 SA, and through the ABC's news channel, ABC News 24.

Access to the VAST service will be managed by the use of a smart card which will be provided with the VAST set-top box. There are no eligibility criteria for access to the national services, the ABC and the SBS, and applications for these services may be made through *mySwitch* at any time – when viewers purchase a VAST set-top box the smart card will permit immediate access to these services once enabled.

Applying for VAST

To determine their eligibility to receive commercial television services through VAST, viewers should go to *mySwitch* and enter their address. If terrestrial coverage is inadequate at their location, viewers can then proceed via *mySwitch* to apply for access to all services on VAST. The approval of access to the commercial services on VAST is managed by the commercial broadcasters.

If *mySwitch* indicates that the commercial broadcasters believe that a location should receive adequate reception of their local terrestrial television services and should not need the VAST service, viewers can have their individual circumstances assessed. If the commercial broadcasters then determine that the viewer does not have adequate reception of all terrestrial commercial digital television services at their particular address the viewer will be issued with a reception certificate authorising access to the commercial free-to-air services of VAST.

Your members located in the aforementioned Broken Hill, Riverland, Mt Gambier/South East South Australia and Spencer Gulf switchover areas, which switched to digital-only broadcasts on 15 December 2010, are eligible to apply for VAST now.

Viewers who are located in the Remote Central and Eastern Australia (RCEA) licence area, or who are currently authorised to receive their television services by way of the Aurora remote area broadcasting service as an out-of-area service, may also access the VAST service now.

Viewers located in the Adelaide switchover area can expect to apply for VAST from June 2013, if terrestrial digital coverage is inadequate by this time.

VAST equipment and costs

To access the VAST service, viewers will need to purchase a VAST set-top box and a satellite dish. The retail cost of equipment is about \$280 (including GST) for a VAST set-top box and smart card, and about \$100 for a standard satellite dish. The hourly rate of satellite antenna installers will vary depending on the location of the premises, building type and other individual factors.

It is important to note that this is a one-off expense – there are no ongoing subscription or other costs involved in using the VAST service. Moreover, the cost of accessing the VAST service is not dissimilar to what many households will have to spend to install or upgrade their reception equipment to receive terrestrially broadcast digital television services. In the latter case a household is likely to invest in a new roof-mounted antenna and associated cabling and connectors, while a VAST household will require a roof-mounted satellite receiving dish with associated cabling and connectors.

It is recommended that viewers obtain broadcaster permission to access the full suite of commercial channels on the VAST service prior to purchasing any equipment. The purchase of a VAST set-top box will not, on its own, entitle viewers to access digital commercial television services on VAST.

Satellite Subsidy Scheme

On 11 May 2010, the Minister announced that households in areas that are currently served by self-help sites that are not converted to digital, and that are not able to receive an adequate signal from another transmitter serving their area, will be eligible to access the Satellite Subsidy Scheme to assist them to receive their digital television services by satellite.

The Satellite Subsidy Scheme was established to recognise the investment made by households in 'self-help' communities in establishing and running their own analog self-help towers. Many households in these communities have paid higher domestic rates to fund the operation of the self help retransmission sites. It is important to understand that the Satellite Subsidy is only made available to viewers in these self-help communities.

Under the Satellite Subsidy Scheme, a subsidised installation package is provided by satellite installers contracted by the government with experience in domestic satellite dish installation to households that currently receive their television services through analog-only self-help television towers.

The household payment for households moving to the VAST service in the regional South Australian switchover areas which have already switched to digital-only broadcasts on 15 December 2011 and regional Victorian switchover areas (which switched to digital-only broadcasting on 5 May 2011) was \$200. Household payments for regional Queensland are \$220. Contracts have not yet been entered into for installations in other areas, so final co-payment amounts have not yet been determined.

To ensure a flat co-payment across large areas, the government provides a subsidy of \$400 per household in defined 'standard' areas, \$550 in defined 'very remote' areas and \$700 in defined 'far north tropical' areas. Households in defined remote indigenous communities may also be eligible for additional assistance of \$280 per household which will mean that the scheme is likely to cover all, or virtually all, of the cost of installations for these communities.

Eligible customers in the regional South Australian switchover areas which have already switched to digital-only broadcasts on 15 December 2010 received letters inviting them to participate in the scheme in June 2010. Eligible South Australian customers in the Remote Central and Eastern Australia switchover area and those in the Adelaide switchover area will receive letters from October 2011.

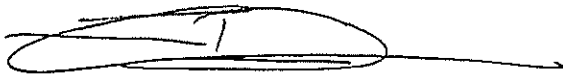
Viewers can check their eligibility for the Satellite Subsidy Scheme by entering their address into *mySwitch* on the Digital Ready website.

Further information about digital switchover

Further information about digital switchover, the VAST service and switchover-related subsidies may be obtained from the Digital Ready website at www.digitalready.gov.au or by calling the Digital Ready Information Line on free call number 1800 20 10 13. The Digital Ready Information Line operates seven days a week from 8:00 am to 10:00 pm (AEST).

Thank you for bringing this matter to the Minister's attention. I trust this information will be of assistance.

Yours sincerely



Emma Dawson
Adviser