

# SOUTH EAST LOCAL GOVERNMENT ASSOCIATION INC

Incorporated under the provisions of The Local Government Act

C/- PO Box 1445  
Mount Gambier 5290

“Old Town Hall”  
Commercial Street East  
Mount Gambier

Phone: 08 8723 1057  
Fax: 08 8723 1286  
Email: seo@selga.sa.gov.au

*Business Hours - 9.00 am to 5.00 pm - Monday to Friday*

## 2011-2012 Regional Telecommunications Review Secretariat Department of Broadband, Communications and the Digital Economy GPO Box 2154 CANBERRA ACT 2601

*President:*

Mayor Richard  
Vickery

*Executive Officer:*

Rob Forgan

### 2011-2012 Regional Telecommunications Review

*Member Councils:*

*City of:*

Mount Gambier

*Districts of:*

Grant

Kingston

Naracoorte Lucindale

Robe

Tatiara

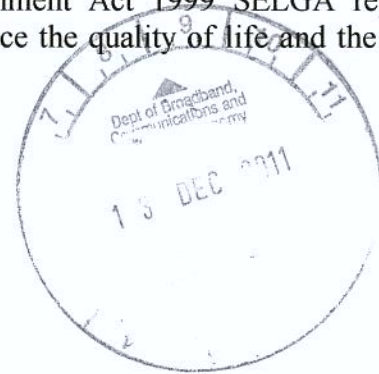
Wattle Range

The South East Local Government Association (SELGA) appreciates the opportunity to have input into the review of telecommunication services in regional, rural and remote parts of Australia.

SELGA is a regional organisation serving the Limestone Coast (SE) community of South Australia. Established under the Local Government Act 1999 SELGA represents 7 Constituent Councils that work together to enhance the quality of life and the vitality of our regional community.

Our Constituent Councils include:

- City of Mount Gambier
- District Council of Grant
- Kingston District Council
- Naracoorte Lucindale Council
- District Council of Robe
- Tatiara District Council
- Wattle Range Council



SELGA is pleased to note the Government's Commitment to Regional Australia announced on 7 September 2010, a commitment that includes the regional roll out of the NBN to ensure non-metropolitan communities are amongst the first beneficiaries of high speed broadband.

### **The Information Economy & Regional Economic Development.**

The Limestone Coast is a diverse region and its access to water and fertile land attracts considerable investment from Australia and overseas. In the upper South East, Teys Bros have completed a multi-million dollar project creating 180 new jobs at their meat processing facilities outside Naracoorte. Further north in the Tatiara, there has been a massive expansion in horticulture with approx 90,000 tonnes of new products grown and transported to Melbourne, Adelaide and Sydney. While the road network in this more remote area of our region is of strategic importance to new and existing industries, it is also vital that an efficient and reliable telecommunications network supports e-business and reduces the cost of doing business between all players along the length of the supply chain.

The South Australian Regional Tourism Growth Plan released in 2011 is a strategic plan that identifies the importance of information and telecommunication services in growing our regional tourism industry. In 2010, approximately 40% of our tourism operators were identified as having the ability to accept online bookings. This is an unacceptable situation that needs urgent addressing and a target has been set to achieve 90% of our tourism businesses becoming online bookable by 2012. The widespread availability of improved and affordable broadband will make this possible leading to growth in tourism expenditure and the creation of new direct and indirect jobs.

The South East Local Government Association (SELGA) and the RDA Limestone Coast have previously raised the issue of regional communication infrastructure with the Australian and South Australian Governments. The RDALC's "Regional Roadmap" points out that communications are an integral part of the Limestone Coast regional growth plan.

Improvements are required to existing voice and data capability through access to affordable high speed broadband and improved mobile phone coverage. Regional consultations at Council and community level demonstrate that the productivity of the Limestone Coast is jeopardised by continuing with unpredictable and in-efficient access to modern telecommunication systems.

The RDA Regional Roadmap also identifies the importance of building additional capacity to be a smart, competitive region that is able to innovate and respond to change.

## **Regional Education and Health Outcomes**

### **Education**

Access to education remains a challenge if we are able to build our business and technical skills in a world impacted by globalisation and rapid developments in technology. Regional telecommunications are a key to learning in rural and regional Australia if we are to remain competitive in the global market place.

The Limestone Coast region aims to increase access to higher education facilities, services, student study options and additional university, TAFE SA and apprenticeship places. Telecommunication improvements can support this region's drive to increase higher learning opportunities at a local level and through external delivery mode. External study modes will increase the number of young people that remain in our region to gain tertiary qualifications and encourage professionals to relocate to the region.

The majority of our regional population live approximately 450 kilometers distant from the universities of Adelaide and Melbourne making educational access a priority for our region.

In August 2009, SELGA wrote to the Senate Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport References Committee on the issue of Rural and Regional Access to Secondary and Tertiary Education Opportunities.

In our submission we advised:

*“Rural and regional students are often disadvantaged through lack of available subject choice and access to educational resources.*

*While access to technology is seen as an integral part of the “Education Revolution” and regarded as a possible solution to address equity, access and distance education issues in regional areas, there is still considerable progress to be made.*

*Limited or zero broadband coverage, poor and slow internet speeds remain a problem in many of our rural and remote areas and are not on par with metropolitan services. The roll out of the National Broadband Network across rural and regional Australia with an emphasis on education, health and emergency services if sustained will go some way in addressing this imbalance”.*

In our Senate submission we also raised the issue regarding the availability of qualified teachers in the country or prepared to move to the country is at crisis point and aggravated by the ageing of the country teaching workforce. Improved Broadband is one way of improving existing teaching resources and overcoming teacher shortages which will be exacerbated by those who are rapidly approaching retirement.

## **Health**

“Fit for Purpose” high speed broadband services are essential for connecting the people of rural Australia with the health system through current and future tele-health applications and for the sharing of health information. The current and future rural health workforce will rely more and more on high speed broadband connections for aspects of their training and education, ongoing professional development and intra and inter professional advice and mentoring.

The Flinders University Rural Clinical School (FURCS) based in Mount Gambier is one of a number of rural clinical schools based in rural and regional South Australia that rely on fast and efficient broadband. FURCS is funded by the Australian Federal Government as part of a nation-wide strategy to improve the health of those in rural and remote areas by increasing the number of health professionals working in those areas. The strategy focuses on:

- encouraging students from rural and remote areas to enrol in training courses for health professionals
- ensuring that substantial training of health professionals occurs in rural and remote areas.

Online access is important to the continuation of their high quality medical education, research activities and clinical service for rural communities and the placement of health undergraduates in rural Australia. Connections need to go beyond the current public health system networks so that they are available to private and isolated practitioners. High speed broadband connections will also underpin business opportunities outside health and the overall sustainability of rural communities.

SELGA shares the concerns expressed by the National Rural Health Alliance as to whether the isolated rural and remote communities that are in most need of health connections and support will be covered in a timely way and whether the proposed connections will be adequate for health applications.

Our concerns also extend to the ultimate cost of services for our consumers, businesses and health professionals and cost structures that will work and be affordable beyond the competitive markets that exist in the major cities and regional centres.

### **Any Other issues - Emergency Services**

One new and additional concern that has come to the recent attention of our Association is the capacity of our phone network during times of emergencies.

With the advent of smart phones vital lines of communications tend to “crash” early in emergency situations such as bushfires. We are informed that that the system cannot cope with photo and video uploads taken by residents and that the increased level of data being transmitted brings down and “crashes” the existing telecommunications systems with their limited capacity in a short and situation critical period of time, e.g. 20 minutes.

Our regional Association too is anxious about the rate of progress in addressing known dead spots in the Limestone Coast region. While we understand and are encouraged that telecommunications carriers are addressing “capacity” issues we are concerned that the nature of regional markets that offer “thin” pickings for the major Telcos offer little financial encouragement for investing in improving regional “coverage”. In this market we fear that regional and rural areas will remain “on hold” for some considerable time unless leadership and high level intervention is taken.

### **Telephony**

Limestone Coast users have concerns about:

1. Mobile phone coverage on our road systems including our regional highways.
2. New agribusiness industries. Refer to the example raised in our comments on the Information Economy and Regional Economic Development.
3. Coverage for small communities and known dead spots. Our regional Association is concerned about the rate of progress in addressing known dead spots in the Limestone Coast region. While we understand and are encouraged that telecommunications carriers are addressing “capacity” issues we are concerned that the nature of regional markets with their “thin” pickings for the major Telcos offer little financial encouragement for investing in improving regional coverage. In this market regional and rural areas will remain “on hold” for some considerable time unless leadership and high level intervention is taken.

At Mundulla (population 1042) in the Tatiara District residents have started to petition Telstra to do something about the town’s mobile phone coverage. A recent meeting of the Tatiara Business Association in Mundulla heard examples that included:

- One lady with a son who has an allergic reaction to a certain nut, could not use the home phone because the exchange was down and had to walk over 1km to obtain a Telstra Mobile signal to contact an ambulance
- The pharmacist, who owns the Bordertown and Keith Pharmacies and lives in Mundulla, gets emergency calls (when they get through) from the Bordertown Hospital for emergency pharmaceuticals, this is not only for locals but for travellers on the Dukes Highway (Highway 1Melbourne to Adelaide), and on a few occasions have not been able to contact him
- Mundulla General Store and Post Office has had numerous cases of loss of business when the landlines go down as there is no mobile reception.

The Mundulla experience we believe is not an isolated one as South Australia of all the Australian States and Territories has the highest percentage of locations (42%) outside the metropolitan area with less than 1000 people.

It is the view of our Association that the Australian Government should remain focused on delivering universal telecommunication services to improve community access, industry competitiveness and ubiquitous and equitable service to regional Australia.

Our Association is alarmed that the current level of telecommunication service is below reasonable community expectations and of a standard that impedes our economic and community development and population growth goals.

We appreciate that the RTR is prepared to consult with our community and undertakes to act on their findings by advising the Australian Government on areas needing urgent attention.

We thank you for the opportunity to comment.

Yours sincerely



Richard Vickery  
President

7 December 2011