



December 1, 2011

2011-12 Regional Telecommunications Review Secretariat  
Department of Broadband, Communications and the Digital Economy  
GPO Box 2154  
Canberra ACT 2601

Dear Sir/Madam,

The Western Australian Farmers Federation (Inc.) (WAFarmers) thanks you for the opportunity to comment on the Issues Paper for the *'2011-12 Regional Telecommunications Review'*.

WAFarmers is the State's largest and most influential rural lobby and service organisation. WAFarmers represents approximately 4,000 Western Australian farmers from a range of primary industries including grain growers, meat and wool producers, dairy farmers, pastoralists, horticulturalists, commercial egg producers and beekeepers. Collectively our members are major contributors to the \$7.1 billion gross value of production that agriculture in its various forms contributes annually to Western Australia's economy. Additionally, through differing forms of land tenure, our members own, control and capably manage many millions of hectares of the State's land mass and as such are responsible for maintaining the productive capacity and environmental well being of that land.

As background to this submission, WAFarmers appeared before members of the Regional Telecommunications Review Committee in Perth on November 23. It is in support of the discussion at that recent meeting, that we provide these comments.

- WAFarmers believes that the review is timely given the challenges currently facing Australia's farmers, their industry and rural communities.
- The family owned and managed farm has been the cornerstone of Australian agriculture for over 200 years. WAFarmers believes that this small (relative), highly efficient business management structure will remain into the future.
- Few industries have achieved the level of productivity gain which agriculture (at 2.8%) has in the last thirty years. Whilst the actual productivity gain is subject to conjecture, the Federal Government has acknowledged that agriculture's productivity gain is second only to that of the IT industry.

- WAFarmers believes that the next great area of productivity gain will be driven by communications technology. Access to central or industry data bases, in-time production and marketing information will be needed by growers, both in their paddocks and their office.
- A farmer's communications package needs includes not only the ability to run modern, efficient farm businesses but more broadly, the necessary health, education and social needs of their rural communities.
- An efficient, low cost telecommunications service can assist farmers, in areas such as 'limiting the distance' travelled for meetings through use of e-based communications, improving the availability and timeliness of information delivery, and in ensuring business development is not hampered by its telecommunications service.
- Currently, many farmers experience a second or third rate telecommunications service. In the week of the Perth hearing, the State's rural press featured several articles focussing on the poor condition of rural phone infrastructure. Our representatives tabled these articles, which included pictures of Telstra cables lying on the ground exposed to the elements. This is hardly a demonstration of a modern communications system, more like that of a third world, which is how it performs for many farmers and pastoralists.
- A recent member survey conducted by WAFarmers found it was not too difficult to identify farmers who lack complete mobile coverage on their farms. This was not in areas considered to be 'remote' by any definition, but in several cases they were within a 2 hour drive of the CBD, or even closer to major regional centres. This must improve is the information needs of Western Australia's farmers are to be met.
- The Western Australian government has a focus on decentralisation through its 'super towns' concept and whilst rural towns are great places to live, their services must keep pace with city infrastructure. The next generation of Australians will not live in regional areas if their living standards are poor compared to those of the metropolitan areas.
- WAFarmers requests that the Review Committee review the opportunities that exist to share communication technology and infrastructure with other regional based businesses, such as mining, police/defence and local government authorities, in order to be able to improve, and keep improving the delivery of information to farmers.

WAFarmers thanks you for your consideration of this submission. Should you wish to further discuss the content of this submission, please do not hesitate to contact myself or WAFarmers Director of Policy, Alan Hill on (08) 9486 2100.

Yours sincerely



**Mike Norton**  
President