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Submission on telecommunications issues affecting people in regional Australia

To secretariat@trrc.gov.au

Good day

I welcome the opportunity to make a submission regarding telecommunications issues that affect Australians living in regional areas.

I am a computer consultant and web developer living 20 klms from Alexandra in North Eastern Victoria. I work primarily from home and have a number of clients in the area. My major issue, and that of many of my clients, with the telecommunications service provided by Telstra Bigpond, is the lack of wireless broadband capacity. Like many others who live and work in the area, we have spent approximately \$2000 on an external aerial and a repeater to ensure that we have, not only working mobile phones, but that we can receive the wireless signal. The speed is adequate but the maximum that we are able to receive is 15 gigabytes and that costs just over \$100 per month.

If we go over our limit our service is slowed to unusable or we can call Bigpond and they will decide whether we can have another 5 gigabytes. I'm unsure as to why they can give us another 5 gigabytes free but will not let us have another 5 gigabytes that we would pay for.

We are not gamers, we don't download movies, we're not asking for 200 gig for \$40 as is available in the city, 30 gigabytes would be nice, we just want to run our business without the restriction of such low capacity, which I believe is decided purely by Telstra, no-one has yet given me a feasible reason why the allocation is so low, and we want to pay a reasonable price for the service.

Q1. Do people in regional Australia believe their reliance on telecommunications differs from those in urban areas? How does it differ and can you provide examples?

In times of emergency, such as a bushfire, telecommunications can mean the difference between life and death in a regional area. During the 2009 bushfires we had no mobile phones, we were running a generator to power radio and were constantly frustrated by radio announcers suggesting that we check the emergency web sites for further information. We had no internet. We relied on an impromptu bush telegraph between neighbours for vital information.

Q2. For those users already connected to an nbn network service, has the service met your expectations?

We were going to apply for NBN satellite but our neighbours had it and it was so overloaded that the speed was reduced to a snail's pace. The neighbours went back to wireless.

Q3. Having regard to the technical solution likely to be used in your area, do you have views on the adequacy of that solution in terms of meeting needs now and into the future?

Our solution can only ever be wireless and it doesn't meet the needs now, so unless they are going to considerably up the capacity and maintain at least the speed we have then we will still be stuck with an inadequate and expensive service. This lack of capacity stymies the growth of many small businesses and discourages people from moving to regional areas. A new neighbour ended up moving back to the city because she was unable to run her travel agency business because of the restrictions on the amount of broadband she was able to purchase.

Q4. Irrespective of the adequacy of your local access, are there issues with backhaul or long distance carriage that impacts on your use of telecommunications services?

Yes, when it is holiday season and Lake Eildon is busy with hundreds of houseboats and holiday makers our speed often slows dramatically because of the load on the system. This can be for a period up to six weeks over the Christmas holiday period and it affects many businesses in the area.

Q5. For users living in areas without mobile coverage, what priorities, other than specific locations, do you consider should be recognised in future efforts to improve coverage?

We have mobile coverage because we have paid an extra \$900 to Telstra for a repeater to enable us to use their service! Without it we would have no coverage. We're two hours from Melbourne not in the middle of the Nullarbor.

Q6. What opportunities do the mobile network industry see for extending coverage in regional Australia and increasing investment in mobile networks?

N/A

Q7. Do you have any views on co-investment approaches that might help to improve the broadband technology outcome in your area?

Australia has one of the most expensive and inadequate broadband systems in the world. We are a laughing stock in Canada when it comes to broadband. Why? Someone must be able to do it better than the current incumbents

Q8. How might new applications and services that utilise mobile networks for voice and data transform the way you live and work?

If we had more capacity we would be able to utilise services such as Skype and Teamviewer to access client computers remotely thus avoiding the need to drive to a client site, a journey that can be an 80 km round trip. Thus freeing up time, saving on petrol and running costs, and more efficiently running a business.

Q9. What communications barriers have you experienced in expanding or operating your business or providing services, such as health or education? Have you been able to overcome these barriers and if so, how?

Lack of broadband, I have to ration it to make sure I get through the month without going over the limit. I would be able to train clients online rather than driving to their premises. Only an increase in capacity will solve the problem. Blinding speed is not a consideration for us, we just want more capacity.

Q10. What communication functions (e.g. speed, mobility, reliability, data, etc) would best suit your needs, noting the limitations of each technology (e.g. mobile, wireless, satellite, fibre)?

Reliability and more capacity.

Q11. Do we need to continue to guarantee the standard telephone service for all (or only some) consumers, and if so, to what extent?

If we could rely on our mobile phone service we would not have a landline. However, as was brought home to us in 2009, to get rid of the landline could mean no communication at all in an extremely dangerous situation.

Q12. Are there new or other services, the availability of which should be underpinned by consumer safeguards?

Q13. What standards should apply to your services? How might they best be enforced?

It should be reliable, there should not be such a huge chasm between the amount of broadband available to regional customers and city customers. We understand that there is a degree of difficulty in supplying telecommunications to regional areas and we are not asking for the same service that is supplied in the city, we just want an adequate and fair service that allows us to run our businesses efficiently and grow them to benefit our regional communities. Telstra have the monopoly in many regional areas, that should mean that they must provide an adequate service to those areas and not gouge people because they have no other choice of telecommunications suppliers. Australia should be a leader in telecommunications technology not a backwater.

Thank you.

Glyn O'Keefe

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