



Submission by Ms Sam Hicks
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Submission to the Regional Telecommunications Independent Review 2015

2015 Regional Telecommunications Review Secretariat
 Department of Communications
 GPO Box 2154
 CANBERRA ACT 260

Dear Members of the 2015 Regional Telecommunications Independent Review Committee,

this is the second Regional Telecommunications Independent Review I have submitted and thank you for the opportunity to do so again.

My submission is relation to slow internet speed over satellite, enforced high end plans being reduced and mobile coverage.

Background

My name is Sam Hicks, I live and work from a little hamlet called Fawcett, 14 kilometres North West of Alexandra, within the shire of Murrindindi located in North East Victoria.

- I am a self-employed business consultant who works with SME's and not for profits in a paid (and pro bono) capacity in the area of business development, marketing (online) and photography 3 days per week.
- We currently manage/own 1000 acres of land and run beef cattle over the Murrindindi and Mansfield shires.
- My partner is a self-employed wall and floor tiler.
- We rely heavily on the internet for personal use, banking, business, volunteerism and socialisation.
- We have lived in this beautiful region since 2000 coming from Melbourne.

When we first moved up here we were presented with very old Telstra lines and once the internet was established we had the big speed of 128kps over landlines.

In 2005 we upgraded to isdn with Telstra once we lobbied to the HUME Regional Manager of Telstra for many years to have a repeater placed half way down Spring Creek Road to ensure consistency of signal.

Mobile services; we are on 3G and our immediate area in a valley is considered *a blackspot* *And yes we have nominated to the Mobile Black Spot Programme 14th of July 2015.*

To successfully use our mobiles we have to drive 6 kilometres down the road towards Alexandra to retrieve messages and send texts. *(Or to make a call if our landline is out.)*

When Telstra were discontinuing their ISDN and satellite technology was offered to us in 2009 we took it for what it could offer us:

Consistent, faster internet speed and larger plans to accommodate our growth.

We signed up with Harbour IT now Harbour ISP as their prices were below Telstra and Optus for comparable services provided on a stand-alone basis.

As we are in a blackspot with little or no mobile coverage; Optus does not work here, Telstra will on a good day give you 1 -2 bars in a few spots (on top of the shed pointing north) although nothing reliable so we were not interested in a bundled plan.

Submission questions

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?

Yes I believe so, we are trying to maintain level of competitiveness in business, and internet provides cheaper online solutions.

A bonus is being able to stay in contact with friends and family via email and or social media channels.

Examples:

Closeness to say an Apple or Telstra store in relation to repairs, advice and or purchases.

Tierney of distance from friends and relatives in relation to ourselves who moved to a regional area from an Melbourne in 2000.

In essence it brings us closer to our urban counterparts.

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

In some ways yes, we were forced to go to satellite after Telstra stopped providing ISDN, so it seemed the perfect solution.

Since being on Satellite we have had:

Inconsistent internet speed, drop outs,

3 Satellite (subsidised) infrastructure upgrades – new equipment and re positioning of the dish to align up better with the satellite,

Satellite outages due to upgrades of satellite software issues and bad weather (originally during peak times then after midnight),

Plans that are priced considerably dearer than our city cousins who have the ability to bundle with other services i.e. tv/ mobile etc.,

In relation to the enforced NBN high user plan customer reduced plan directive (from 60-80 gig to 20gig) as of May 2015 this has severely crippled the way we use the internet for personal and business use.

The biggest complaint we have is the fact that our internet is now shaped, meaning to stay under our allocated 20 gig from about 10 gig of data use our plan is so severely shaped that only plain text emails can be set and icloud based services and or such day to day running of internet banking cannot be accessed due to time outs.

From the letter received from Harbour ISP

“This plan is shaped and therefore your service is slowed down instead of receiving excess usage charges”

Top 6 issues with slower and inconsistent speed:

Disconnection/ disruption of basic necessities and software programs such as:

Google

Internet banking – unable to keep a session open long enough to download statements, make banking changes to accounts and or set up payments.

Website updating (business clients)

Cloud based operating systems such as MSO – outlook – emails, word and others

Mail washer pro – stopping the spam at the servers for emails

Emails are either coming in short sharp bursts or sitting in ‘The outbox’ for days. *(One email remained in the outbox for 4 days before I deleted it and sent the 4meg file on a USB to a client by post.)*

Social media (business clients) our social media for personal use is limited to our Telstra plan – when we are in a major town. (Mansfield, Alexandra, Yea and or Marysville) as of June 2015 all social media has to be complete on our Telstra mobiles in town – 14 kilometres away.

ATO tax portal – have now given up trying to get a key and download the software in time for switching over to using the ATO portal independently to our accountant for BAS for the new financial year.

Drop box – to access committee/ board and or project based files – 11 files updating took in excess of 3 days to update.

All due to the time outs, connection resets and or restriction of the internet speed.

We are considering whether or not we stay on the NBN as we are not getting what we pay for in the respect of a plan that will cater to our needs on a personal or business level.

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?

Yes I do, since learning that the Optus satellite only catered for 48,000 users (well our slice of it anyway) the uptake was massive, I have had no guarantee that with the nbn's Long Term Satellite Service (LTSS) in 2016, once operational will cater to all of those outside the fixed line and wireless points such as ourselves. I fear the uptake will be massive and again people's lives and business will be effected by not being able to be part of the service. Or the service again will be limited.

*"The satellites will cover the entire Australian mainland and islands through 101 dedicated 'spot beams'. Each satellite beam has a different capacity in terms of maximum bandwidth, which is split across all end users in the beam, and cannot be changed. The highest capacity beam can serve approximately 15,000 premises, while the lowest 20 lowest-capacity beams can serve an average of 700 premises each."***

When I do the maths on this I still feel it may fall short of demand.

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 in relation to plans and the ability of Telco's to bundle effectively due to the distance from an urban hub.

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?

Ensuring either mobile bandwidth or satellite cover is adequate to cover the black spots. Without mobile coverage and or consistent satellite access communities such as Fawcett who are now relying on digital communication more and more and which now has become such a critical part of our social, economic and emergency roles in our lives.

Priority should be consistency in internet service delivery to assist with those blackspots.

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

From a consumer point of view discontinuing of home landlines and larger take up of mobile plans due to the cheaper rates on mobile bundle plans.

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

When I was allocated a case manager via NBN I was informed about a technology choice program this needs to be more widely showcased as communities taking control of their own telecommunications. I worked out on average to get a tower located in our valley it would be about \$106K to be constructed and put in place (with planning design construction etc) this would be about \$840 per landowner contribution. Most land owners I have spoken to would be keen, many years ago a similar thought was mooted around the community with not much interest. But we wait and see what happens in 2016.

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

Being able to access high speed and or consistent internet speeds provides our business growth opportunities both in attracting new clients and supplying services to existing clients.

As I am in the area of business development most of my clients are in larger towns and or areas that have brilliant coverage. Sometimes I struggle with deadlines due to connectivity issues. The norm is to drive to the end of the road and use 3G to get that all important email sent, banking done or website updates completed.

All of our business applications are cloud based (banking, business reporting and client work) and we need consistent service of supply to maintain these business and ecommerce applications

Overall as you are aware it allows regional businesses the same opportunities to be innovative and maintain a competitive edge as businesses operating in urban areas.

There will be a huge shift in website development over the coming months with WordPress being the forerunner in website applications, this has to be done entirely on line and I currently outsource this to be competitive. I realised a few years ago that I could not compete with urban based businesses in my same field.

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?

Communication barriers in relation to education fall in to 3 main areas:

Training clients

In the days of isdn and the early day of satellite as a business trainer I was able to utilise skype to train remotely and or using programs such as Remote Access – Join me etc., this is now inconstant due to the service drop outs and connection errors especially when we are shaped.

So that I can be reliable in the needs of my clients I have simply dropped this from my business offerings.

This means due to education needs for my micro/SME clients I have to now go to the business direct and train on site.

Online skill education

In relation to online skill based education – accredited courses I cannot complete due to the slowness of the service especially when we are so heavily shaped.

This has been costly to upskill and train in areas I feel I need to. I have to travel to being trained.

Children's education

There are many families in the road who are now in our situation with shaped satellite plans which makes it difficult for their school age children to submit work on line. They feel that their children and teens are now disadvantaged. I worry for our own children when they enter their school years.

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)?

Over a satellite services, as we will never get fixed line broad band here, and I'm not convinced a next 3G Mobile Tower, or fixed wireless would work sufficiently, so just having a consistency of service, yes high speeds would be great BUT consistency and plans that grow with you is the key - as this builds reliability for business and families.

In a perfect world being able to have consistent satellite speeds of up to the new suggested speeds 25 mbps as download speeds and the upload speeds to 5mps with up to 80 gig of allowance (which can grow with our business and family needs as they grow) would be fantastic.

Back to our specific needs; 20 Gig is okay if you're an occasional user of the internet but as users of the internet for 20 years now (15 years here in Murrindindi) 20 gig doesn't allow for much other than a few emails each day mainly text and the occasional larger email, minor banking sessions and one or two internet searches. Some updates of technology can be in 545MB lots you only need a few of these to use up a few gig worth of data.

Try uploading websites, emailing photos to clients, updating cloud based services and or apps and or doing banking and or business reporting ...again lots of time and data.

Very painful when you're shaped.

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

Until the satellite and limitations of other internet offerings are upgraded and there is a consistent delivery of service I believe that you do need to guarantee the standard telephone service.

For us we would discontinue our landline (we removed our fax line number some years ago) if we could get consistent mobile coverage and or a strong and consistent internet service that could accommodate VOIP. But due to being remote, taking in to consideration of family and business needs and being in a fire risk area we cannot see this happening short term.

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

The safeguards that are currently contained in legislation, regulations and co-regulatory codes of practice and reflect the current fixed-line, voice-only environment need to be extended to all forms of telecommunications.

This way we won't have a repeat of the Optus Satellite service being overcommitted by ISP's clients who underestimated the regional take up for satellite. Since the shaping within the enforced reduced plans it's my understanding that 5000 clients have jumped off the service.

Telstra can only provide up to 6gig on any given mobile service. We have had to up our plans to accommodate the shortfall in our satellite service.

This has been a huge detriment to our family and our business internet needs.

We were encouraged to take up larger plans to expand our plans to accommodate our growth then we have had it taken back down to well over half our needs and simply told *"If you remain unhappy about the changes to your data allowance on your ISS service, you may consider investigating what other non-subsidised commercial satellite services may be available in your area"***

Final points

Evidence of the slowness due to the shaping see below tests done 15 May 2015 10:45pm



From the NBN co website: "The speeds actually experienced by end-users via fibre, fixed wireless or satellite will depend on a number of factors including the retail broadband plan they choose, their equipment and their in premises connection."

Sadly due to the lack of high download plans on satellite infrastructure and mobile coverage at the moment clearly showcases a lack of overall efficiency of telecommunication infrastructure investment in regional areas and in our case such as Murrindindi and Mansfield which disappoints not only ourselves but many residents and business owners here in our valley and adjoining ones. Comparable to other countries we are very much behind in the area of telecommunications.

Thanks again for the opportunity, best of luck with your review and I look forward to reading the final findings.

Kind regards

[Ms. Sam Hicks](#)

15 July 2015

***From a letter from the office of the Minister for Communications the Hon Malcolm Turnbull MP via Chris Drew, Director Broadband Implementation dated the 2nd July 2015.*