



WEST WIMMERA SHIRE COUNCIL

8 July 2015

2015 Regional Telecommunications Review Secretariat
Department of Communications
GPO Box 2154
Canberra ACT 2601

To whom it may concern

The West Wimmera Shire Council (WWSC) welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Australian Governments' Regional Telecommunications Independent Review Committee, to highlight the issues currently facing the area.

WWSC represents approximately 4,200 Australian's across 9,108 square kilometres to the West of Victoria. WWSC is committed to ensuring its residents and ratepayers have adequate and equitable access to telecommunication services. With such a large expanse of area, a large proportion of which is farmed agricultural land, the people of West Wimmera are faced with unprecedented telecommunication disadvantages. WWSC welcomes any improvements to mobile phone services and national broadband network expansions, particularly in areas that are currently faced with minimal or no service.

Given the terrain within the WWSC boundary, the area is a high fire risk, most prominently during the summer months. Critical to mitigating this risk, is the need for widespread telecommunication service to aid the efforts of the Country Fire Service. The regional impact of poor mobile phone coverage has been demonstrated in the Wimmera Southern Mallee region during past fire seasons. Our communities are suffering significant additional risk due to this issue.

WWSC generates over \$156M in economic output in a growing agricultural industry. Farmers are currently being impacted by the limited telecommunication services in certain areas across the shire. Access to reliable and affordable mobile phone and internet coverage in these areas is vital to the future growth of this industry.

Please find the WWSC submission following, which outlines comments that represent the residents and ratepayers the Council serves. Council anticipates the recommendations from the Review and welcomes any further discussions if necessary.

Yours sincerely

Mark Crouch
Chief Executive Officer

Reponses to questions

1. 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?

Regional Australian's experience a higher reliance on telecommunications over those in urban locations, largely attributable to the vastness of regional Australia. Regional Australia faces challenges with people being able to communicate with each other, run their businesses and perform simple daily tasks; challenges that aren't even considered by those in urban areas.

In recent times, populations have increased in regional areas as people from city locations migrate to quieter, safer and more economical lifestyles. This push has increased the pressure and reliance on telecommunications throughout Australia, as these people wish to have the same connectivity provided in urban areas. Living in regional and rural Australia should not differentiate people from reasonable telecommunication services.

WWSC has a strong and growing agricultural industry, with farmers looking towards the future and using innovative and technologically advanced solutions to overcome rising costs and productivity challenges. In an industry worth over \$156M to the local economy, and over \$51B to the national economy, the changing needs of agriculture must be aligned with telecommunication services to improve production and address future threats such as climate change.

Regional Australia is highly susceptible to telecommunication outages, with a sensitive network in certain areas. Instance of outages include storm damage, heat damage, water damage, damage from livestock, wind damage, etc. There are many places in regional Victoria and Australia that rely on a single cable. There have been times where the network has gone down and people have not only been unable to access mobile phone and internet services, but essential services such as emergency services and automatic teller machines for cash.

Residents located in regional areas rely on access through telecommunications means, for government, business and social services. Without access to reliable and secure mobile phone and internet services, these vital connections cannot be made.

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

Not applicable

3. 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?

The service intended to be offered within the WWSC will be an adequate solution in the short term future when it eventually happens. However, given that there is still no timeframe for rollout in the major townships (let alone more remote locations), by the time this actually occurs the service will be well over a decade behind other areas. The disadvantage and divide that this lapse creates for people within the WWSC is

unsurpassed. It also presents a large weakness for regional communities that have significant population decline and are making attempts to attract people back to these areas.

Variability in access and signal strength is a growing issue as data use increases. The capacity of existing mobile infrastructure to service this growth is questioned, as well as the investment required to maintain the current service levels, aside from increasing services in regional areas.

4. 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?

Not known

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

The provision of services to regional and rural areas of Australia is critical to the future economic sustainability of our communities. Increasing reliance on telecommunications in agriculture, tourism, emergency management and our daily business and household transactions puts regional Australia at a competitive disadvantage due to poor access and lack of competition in the provision of the necessary telecommunications services.

The recently released Federal Government Agricultural Competitiveness White Paper recognises the importance of improved telecommunications services in rural areas. This is because agriculture is the primary industry in regional Australia, nowhere more so than in West Wimmera. Given the focus and growth expectation of the agriculture sector, it is important that technology meets the current and future demands of this industry, some of which are still unknown. Priorities to improve coverage should take into account the flexibility and innovation needed for developing communications infrastructure that supports the agriculture sector.

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

Not applicable

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

WWSC supports any type of investment in technology and communications in the region, in particular investment that maximises the use of existing infrastructure. Industry support and collaboration with the federal and state governments and telecommunication providers is essential to ensuring the most efficient, yet effective, contribution. This would be seen as a partial solution in regional areas.

Investment in the fixed wireless network has the potential to provide a significant boost in telecommunications infrastructure in regional areas with poor mobile service, such as West Wimmera. NBN Co base station location, improvements to local exchanges and access to backhaul services could all contribute to improved mobile services, and should be included in the criteria for allocating funds in the future.

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

Increasing use of technology in agriculture is driven by productivity and efficiency objectives. Data use in animal management, machinery, farm planning, and chemical and nutrient management is growing exponentially. The benefits of improving access to mobile data services in agriculture, through increased productivity, is significant for individual farmers, local economies and the national economy.

Regional and rural areas offer an unrivalled lifestyle, without the drawbacks of city life such as traffic congestion and encroachment. Entrepreneurs have recognised that they can run existing or new businesses more cost-effectively and with an amenable standard of living in regional locations. More adequate and equitable telecommunication services would increase the opportunities for these innovative businesses, and open the pathway wider for more people to relocate to regional and rural locations.

9. 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?

West Wimmera has a number of grain receipt and storage operations, which rely heavily on strong telecommunication infrastructure and service. The majority of these operations are located in remote areas with minimal population base, meaning that transferring data in real time is a challenge and results in inaccurate grain pricing information.

An extensive dairy operation has recently commenced at Neuarcurr, within the West Wimmera boundary. This milking operation is expected to be one of the largest in the country. Current telecommunication services to the main site are minimal, with no service in outlying, surrounding areas. The impact of this to their business in terms of costs and logistics is immeasurable.

These are just two examples of barriers that are currently experienced within the Shire. There are countless others, across a variety of industry and locations in West Wimmera.

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

WWSC expects that telecommunication functions across the whole shire are equal to, if not more adequate, than urban areas. If you travel 15 kilometres out of the Melbourne CBD, mobile phone and internet service is not affected. If you do the same from Edenhope (Victoria), there is zero service. This is not equitable. The speed and reliability should be first-class in regional and rural Australia, as it is in urban areas. The continuation of limited communication functions in regional and rural Australia will only see more people crowding the major cities, creating exponential problems on hard infrastructure, social services, housing and the environment.

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

Providing that whatever telecommunications system is in place is adequate and equitable and provides 100% coverage and high speed function to regional and rural Australia, the standard telephone service may become redundant.

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

Not known

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

The standards applied to the services in regional and rural Australia should be no different to the national standards, providing that they do not disadvantage consumers in any way, such as access or cost barriers. WWSC suggests that further consultation and consideration be undertaken on the standards, to explain the advantages and disadvantages involved prior to making a firm decision.