

Dear reader,

We live in Wartook at the North-Western side of The Grampians, Victoria. In January 2014 the Northern Grampians Complex bushfire burnt most of our side of The Grampians. During the fire and afterwards there was no communication between the fire-affected area closed off by police roadblocks and the outside world.

Telecommunication is a problem in every aspect in the Wartook area:

Landline phones

During the fire, the landline melted. Our exchange, the Laharum exchange, is old and decrepit. There are various technical issues with the landline which are not acknowledged by Telstra.

Mobile phones

Officially there is no mobile reception in Wartook. Some residents on higher elevations get reception through aerials. This turns mobile phones into fixed phones without a landline. Fixed phones without a landline have one major advantage over fixed landline phones: fixed phones without a landline keep working during bushfires.

Emergency services' and other parties' radio communication

There are notorious blackspots in the Northern Grampians. The local CFA is working hard to get them fixed for their radio contact. Radio traffic during emergencies becomes congested. Local people prefer to resort to UHF or mobile phones. These means of communication vary from unreliable to non-existent in the Wartook area.

Internet

Most people in Wartook are presently on the NBN Interim Satellite Service. This service has been deteriorating recently to such a level that it can't be used for lengthy periods of the day. This leaves people in Wartook without Internet unless they can connect to WiFi Internet through their mobile telephone aerials. This is sometime an alternative, but is expensive and cumbersome.

It is needless to say that we pay far too much for far too little service and capacity. As stated in other submissions, we don't need capacity and speed to stream films or download huge amounts of data: we just ask for a functional Internet that can be used for day-to-day business like banking (bill payments, account balances, digital bank statements), work and study (information, references), IT (upgrading programs, apps and operating systems, cloud backup, help), online booking (travel,) and online administration (GST, income tax).

We run a small translation business that at times has to upload 40-80Mb files to our customers at peak times such as six o'clock at night. This is not possible with the present NBN Interim Satellite Service.

Other telecommunications

Digital television reception can be troublesome in lower areas of Wartook.

Issues affected

These are some of the issues affected by the lack of proper telecommunications in Wartook:

- Safety
- Tourism
- Small industries like our translation industry or local industries like hospitality and arts and crafts.
- Farming

Outlook

We are looking into various directions to improve our present rather dire situation. People in our area sent several submissions to the Mobile Blackspot Programme. The secretary to the minister for telecommunications, Mr. Paul Fletcher, came out to Wartook together with our local member Andrew Broad. We all picked up signs that we stood a very good chance to be included in the first round of the Mobile Blackspot Programme as safety was a big issue. Wartook and Laharum were very disappointed and nonplussed not to be included.

We are now looking forward to the launch of the first NBN satellite later this year. This new NBN satellite service runs a couple of risks:

- Failed launch.
- Delayed employment of the satellite itself.
- Incorrect handling of the new satellite service like the present Interim Satellite Service.
- Overpricing

At present people in Wartook have no positive outlook of any kind of improvement of their telecommunications situation despite NBN and despite the Federal Government's Mobile Blackspot Programme. We think that that is unacceptable in a first world country like Australia in this day and age.

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?

The reliance on telecommunications of people in regional Australia differs from those in urban areas in the following paradoxical ways. The more they should be able to rely on reliable telecommunications, the less it is available. Reliable telecommunications could overcome the tyranny of distance in country Australia. Presently they don't.

We are 55 km from our nearest town and 16,000 km from our customers. Information should flow through the Internet. A couple of years ago the fastest way for us to get a medical x-ray from Ballarat to Horsham (200 km) was by taking it by car ourselves from the one hospital to the other. That was the most efficient, but silly.

We do our business via the Internet if the Internet permits so.

Q2.

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

The NBN Interim Satellite service was initially good, but it has deteriorated to the point that it is practically unusable.

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?

Presently we don't know which technical solution will be used. We don't have any information about that. That lack of information and a clear view of the future path is very frustrating. We doubt that a satellite service will provide a rock solid technical solution for our needs now and in the future, based on our satellite experience of the last eight years.

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?

We consider this question too technical for us to answer. We don't have enough insight in the technology beyond our satellite provider. We don't think that end users should be obliged to have that insight.

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?

Honestly, we should have been recognised already for instance through the government's Mobile Blackspot Programme as safety is paramount in our situation. So the answer we suppose is safety.

Q6.

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

We don't think that this is a question for us. We are not very optimistic about this. Telstra is still the number one player in our area and not willing to invest.

Q7.

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

If we were better organised ourselves, we probably could set up some cooperative. However our community is already stretched to keep organisations like the local Hall, sports, the local CFA and local fireguard groups going. It looks like it can't take more on board.

Q8.

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

Such new applications would not transform the way we live and work as we already try to live a different life with a paperless office, paperless communication and day-to-day contact with people and sometimes organisations far away through e-mail, skype and other voice and data applications. The lack of technical development in telecommunications in the country frustrates our efforts to live a more digital life. The lack of technology is holding us back, not so much our healthy suspicion of certain developments in Facebook, YouTube and Instagram.

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?

The present lack of a reliable Internet service in Wartook combined with the lack of mobile coverage is a threat to our business. Like everything in the digital world, the translation business is carried out more and more online with remote servers and applications. To be able to keep up with such a development a certain minimal speed and reliability are required. Size, in Mb's, Gb's and Tb's, is becoming less and less important in the digital world. We should have sufficient data allowance and speed to be able to deal with files of at least 100 Mb. That in itself is not a very big requirement.

We are able to overcome some of these barriers, but it always costs. It implies investments that are sometimes reasonable, sometimes unreasonable.

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)?

For us mobility is far less an issue than reliability in the first place and after that data and then speed. Satellite would be fine if it worked, maintained a minimum speed and allowed for enough data traffic. We don't understand the limitations of fibre in the question. Compared to mobile, wireless and satellite the only limitations of fibre are the costs to construct a fibre network. Fibre would suit us best of course, but recently we have started to believe that a combination of fibre and wireless would do the job.

Q11.

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

In the end landline usage will only be important for legacy users. Landlines in bushfire-prone areas only give a false impression of security. There should be actually a policy to replace them all with other kinds of connections such as wireless.

Q12.

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

We don't understand this question. There should always be consumer safeguards.

Q13.

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

Services should work and consumers like us should have a way to appeal so that working services can be enforced. The present shambles of Interim NBN proves that. Apparently no one can be held responsible for what is happening. Our provider points to NBN and the Telecommunications Ombudsman maintains that NBN is outside its jurisdiction. NBN itself doesn't answer consumer requests for information. Trying to find out what is going on is like flogging a dead horse.

Paul van der Plank
Françoise Thornton-Smith