

The Macdonald Valley Association submission to ACCC Regional Mobile Infrastructure Inquiry 2022-23

The Macdonald Valley Association (MVA) welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the ACCC's inquiry as a member of the public, providing an example of the lived experience of the issues highlighted in the ACCC consultation paper.

Introduction to the Macdonald valley and our association.

The MVA represents and advocates issues and interests for the residents of the Macdonald Valley in NSW, a geographic area spanning some 45km from Wisemans Ferry to Higher MacDonald and Mogo Creek and taking in Wrights Creek and Webb's Creek. The area is a rural/remote community in the Hawkesbury Region. The area is less than 100km and approximately 90minutes drive from Sydney. Although remote, it is still considered part of Greater Sydney.

The MVA provides a link to engage the community with the tiers of government agencies, councils and authorities. Ours is a community that has had to develop resilience over decades and, by necessity, takes responsibility for supporting each other, working together with an eye to our community's safety, needs, priorities and a sustainable future.

Telecommunications in our valley

While improvements in telecommunications have raced ahead in metro areas, they have moved at a snail's pace in the Macdonald valley, and in relation to the basic copper-based telephone service has got worse. While metro areas enjoy the benefits of 5G mobile coverage, we have very limited 3G and 4G mobile coverage accessible only by a small number of residents. Most of our residents have access to basic ADSL but the performance is poor and the connection unreliable. Distance from the exchange, wet weather, trees on lines and sharing limited bandwidth with multiple households all impact our overall experience. Some parts of the valley can use satellite services such as Skymuster and Starlink, which is helpful. However, while download speeds are a distinct improvement on the ADSL service, they are still very poor compared with those available in metro areas. Upload speeds with Skymuster often render the service unusable (e.g. for conference calls). Both Skymuster and Starlink are expensive compared to other NBN services available, and the weather impacts their reliability. And while it works for some, the terrain of our valley means that many of our neighbours cannot access this technology.

In 2016 NSW government **announced** that as part of the Mobile Blackspot program and in partnership with **Optus** they would be installing a mobile tower. Six years on, and we are still waiting.

Telstra has recently installed a [dedicated fibre optic cable](#) to connect the exchange to our local public school. The cable runs through most residents' properties but, unfortunately is only accessible by the school. We understand that the cost of installing the cable was significant. Given that the cost of building such networks in rural areas is reportedly high and returns low, many residents have questioned why the NSW State government and Telstra did not leverage this opportunity to help improve the situation in our community.

Natural disasters and other such emergency situations

The characteristics of our valley pose particular challenges in cases of emergencies and disaster scenarios, for example, remoteness, accessibility issues and communications (noting the absence of mobile coverage). The main access and only sealed road access to the valley is via the Webbs Creek Road Ferry and main Wisemans Ferry, which are prone to sudden closure in emergencies for a week or more.

For example, during the recent 2022 floods, the Macdonald Valley was without power in some cases for weeks.. With no power supply, the Telstra exchange and the small cell (located at Macdonald Valley Public school) stop working. In times of flood, the ferries stop working, which means the valley becomes completely isolated. Without connection to “ the outside world”, we are unable to receive bulletins from emergency services such as SES, and updates regarding the restoration of services such as electricity, phone and ferry services.

In February 2022, the MVA was awarded funding under the Black Summer bushfire grant program. We are using this funding to purchase [UHF handheld radios](#) providing a simple low-tech, community-run, but potentially life-saving solution. The UHF radios will go some way to address significant communication issues in our valley; no mobile coverage and power-dependent landline and internet, inadequacies that were critically exposed during the recent fire and flood emergencies.

A recent article in the [Guardian newspaper](#) covered our experience in the July 2022 flood.

As (hopefully) likely users of towers and associated infrastructure, and as members of the community that are interested in improvements in mobile coverage and/or temporary mobile roaming services to be provided during natural disasters and other such emergencies, we would welcome the opportunity to discuss our situation in more detail with the ACCC and answer any questions that you may have regarding telecommunications in the Macdonald Valley.

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