

SUBMISSION TO ACCC REGIONAL MOBILE INFRASTRUCTURE INQUIRY

We are grateful for the opportunity to provide a submission to the above Inquiry. Specifically, we address Q20 “How are consumers impacted by a lack of mobile coverage?”

Background

We are beef producers in the Southwest of Western Australia, specifically about 10 kilometres south of the town of Donnybrook, and just over a kilometre from the South Western Highway. We are not by any definition, remote.

However, we need satellite receivers to access free-to-air TV and radio and NBN Sky Muster for Broadband.

We do not, and never have had, access to an adequate and reliable mobile phone signal in or around our homestead. If we drive up a hill, we can usually pick up a signal.

Some time ago, we switched Mobile Network Operator from Telstra to a local Telco in Bunbury as it was cheaper and we got much more helpful service from them.

We are forced to maintain a Telstra landline (not NBN) because it is our only means of reliable telephone communication, in particular when the power goes off (frequently) and we can't access our satellite broadband (unless we start up a generator!). It is an old and unreliable landline service and, as I write this on 1st August, it has been out of service again (due to a “Telstra network issue” since 27th July and not expected to be restored until 7pm on 5 August.) Telstra does nothing to maintain it and only responds to service interruptions. (This is verbal advice from Telstra technicians.) The lack of maintenance is apparently predicated on a to-be- hoped-for future better roll out of towers.

Our farm is located between two Telstra phone towers, one in Donnybrook and one at Newlands. Recently we were advised by Telstra locally that in our location“*there is expected no hand-held 3G or 4G mobile coverage. The map [see Attachment 1] indicates our 2 nearby mobile towers, both around 7km from the address, at Donnybrook and Newlands. I suspect the serving site is Donnybrook as there is a sector pointing south, but terrain will be the issue impacting coverage..... in terms of improving the mobile coverage to this area of Upper Capel, I'm not sure it would be a priority location for funding due to the limited number of residents and business*”.

Many other residents of this Shire (Donnybrook Balingup) have no, or limited and inadequate mobile phone coverage.

Issues

As well documented by many others in the recent *2021 Regional Telecommunications Review – A step change in demand*, the lack of mobile reception increasingly impacts negatively on our lives, our safety and our capacity to efficiently run our business as it is generally assumed that you have mobile phone reception. We are sure you are well aware of the many issues. For example, secondary security measures are increasing for most internet transactions,

including banking, and require response to an SMS code sent to a mobile phone. Bushfire brigade members are called to fires via SMS message, which many don't receive for days, if at all. It goes on and on.

We have been advised that we should utilise **wifi-calling** via our broadband so we could make and receive mobile calls, SMS and data to our phones. This has advantages and disadvantages including greater costs in some circumstances. When we looked into this, we discovered that although the specifications of our mobile phones were supposed to include wifi-calling functionality, it was not possible to have it even displayed no matter how we followed the "enabling" instructions.

We took the phones to Bunbury to our Mobile Network Operator (not Telstra) who couldn't get the function to appear either. However, testing the phones with different SIM cards (one was a Telstra SIM and the other was one of theirs) did enable the function. This suggested to us that it was something to do with our MNO perhaps not being allowed that functionality on our local Telstra tower/s. Later at home we tested with a neighbour's exact same phone, for which Telstra was the MNO, and wifi-calling worked perfectly.

After doing some more reading we discovered that Telstra does not offer full service to all the providers using its network. It seems that our MNO may not have known that or did not bother to tell us when we switched to them, possibly not realizing our lack of reception issues. The technicalities of all this are beyond most of us! And we don't know what if any implications there may be for us of a 5G rollout.

A solution suggested to us by Telstra was that we should talk to them about investing in (expensive) external equipment to boost our signal.

Either way it seems the only current workable solutions available to us are:

- Install expensive external Telstra mobile booster equipment at our homestead; or
- Switch to Telstra as our MNO so we can access wifi-calling via our NBN Sky Muster broadband.

Both options suggest to us an unacceptable level of monopoly.

Suggestions

In relation to mobile phone coverage in rural areas, we would like to see:

- Improved tower functionality and better sharing arrangements (government subsidised if no other options) including the suggested roaming arrangements in times of emergencies, natural disaster etc; and
- much greater public availability of clear information and more transparency for consumers.

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ATTACHMENT 1

SHOWING TELSTRA TOWERS IN OUR LOCALITY.

