



TENTERFIELD SHIRE
COUNCIL

SUBMISSION TO THE INQUIRY
INTO
REGIONAL TELECOMMUNICATIONS

Introduction:

Tenterfield Shire Council appreciates the opportunity of providing a submission to the inquiry into Regional Telecommunications. From the outset, Council would like to state that it is of the utmost importance that the Federal Government commit the necessary resources to place rural Australians on a level playing field with our friends in metropolitan areas. The two areas that require particular attention are **mobile phone coverage** and **broadband internet access**.

Background:

Tenterfield Shire is located in the New England region in New South Wales and covers an area of 7,124 square kilometres with a population of 6,700. The shire incorporates the township of Tenterfield (located on the junction of the New England and Bruxner Highways with a population of 3,300) and the rural villages of Drake, Urbenville, Legume, Liston, Jennings, Mingoola and Torrington. The major industries in the shire include sheep and cattle grazing, vineyards, agriculture, tourism and national parks.

Mobile Phone Coverage

The mobile phone coverage in the Tenterfield Shire is inadequate at present with approximately half of the population having no mobile phone coverage at their place of residence. Being a local authority, Council is constantly in contact with the rural residents of the shire and the overwhelming feedback is that the mobile phone network needs to be extended so that the majority of residents and businesses (including farmers) can receive the service.

Council has been lobbying both Telstra Country Wide and the Federal Government for additional mobile phone towers in areas such as Acacia Plateau Ridge which would provide coverage along the Mt Lindesay Road and service a large part of the rural land area north of Tenterfield (including Queensland) and would also service tourists visiting the many National Parks in the area (such as Bald Rock National Park which attracts in excess of 120,000 visitors annually). Other areas that currently have inadequate mobile phone coverage are the New England Highway (north/south) and the Bruxner Highway (east/west) with the lack of mobile phone services in these areas not only affecting local residents but also travellers through the area.

Council also suggests that the Federal Government, in partnership with Telstra, provide assistance to rural residents that are not in the mobile phone coverage area by providing substantial subsidies for both the cost of acquiring and the cost of operating a satellite phone.

Council takes this opportunity to also oppose the current practice of the Federal Government in placing some of the burden for the construction of mobile phone towers onto local councils and the local community, as was the case with funding arrangements through Networking the Nation. Council believes that the Federal Government and Telstra should be fully responsible for providing mobile phone services to all Australians.

Internet Access

To enable the rural community to communicate and have access to the same information as our city counterparts it is imperative that all rural residents have broadband internet access. This may sound excessive at this point in time but it is vitally important that the necessary foresight be shown in order to provide rural residents with affordable broadband internet access. The reliance on businesses to have access to a fast and reliable internet connection is steadily increasing and we are only a short time away from it becoming an absolute necessity for any business (including farmers).

Tenterfield is a rural town of 3,300 people and there is no broadband internet access in the town at present. The current speed for businesses and residents to send, receive and download documents is limited to around 32k whereas broadband internet access would enable speeds of around 1,500k. Rural residents need access to broadband internet services if it is going to compete with metropolitan Australia and the rest of the world.

Local Presence and Services

Council highly recommends that Telstra maintain a local presence in the area as we have witnessed numerous times in the past where government departments have left the town and the service level has dropped almost overnight. As Telstra is the main telecommunications carrier and owns the majority of telecommunication assets it is imperative that they have a local presence. This same principle would apply to other carriers that provide services in the area, particularly if they were contracted to maintain telecommunication assets.

In relation to the standard of local telephone services, the feedback that Council has received is that many of the copper lines still in place in rural areas are in poor condition with the waiting time for repairs being anywhere between 6-14 days. In addition, it has been reported that many farmers have Telstra cables lying across their paddocks which poses a hazard to livestock and farmers. Local residents have reported that they have waited 8 months to have these cables buried.

Future Services

In the long term, Council is concerned that even if adequate telecommunication services are implemented, the problem remains that telecommunication services eventually become obsolete. The fear is that if the remainder of Telstra is privatised then the necessary development of telecommunication services in rural Australia will not be forthcoming. Council therefore requests that the Federal Government: -

- a) commit to improving current telecommunication services in rural Australia to place all Australians on a level playing field; and
- b) develop a strategy to ensure that telecommunications services will continue to be developed in rural Australia even after the full privatisation of Telstra.

Conclusion

Tenterfield Shire Council is calling on the Federal Government to invest the necessary resources in rural Australia to improve telecommunication services and, in particular, **mobile phone coverage** and **broadband internet access**. If rural businesses are to compete on a level playing field with our city counterparts, and indeed the rest of the world, it is imperative that both these services be given a high priority, both now and in the future.



Lucy Sullivan

Mayor