

# 2021 Regional Telecommunications Review Submission

## About Us

Yarramalong Communications Action Group

The Yarramalong Communications Action Group is a group of local Yarramalong, Wyong Creek, Dooralong, Jiliby, Ravensdale and Cedar Brush Creek residents who are actively seeking to improve our communities' access to communications (focusing on our future Internet connectivity options).

We are strictly a non-commercial collective of like-minded residents that wishes to improve our Yarramalong / Wyong Creek / Dooralong / Jiliby / Ravensdale / Cedar Brush Creek area's access to high-speed internet.

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## Introduction

In response to your invitation for submissions to the 2021 Regional Telecommunications Review, please find below our submission, categorised into Landlines, Internet, Mobile, Education and Disasters. Where possible we have suggested possible options or outcomes.

Over the past year, our group has attempted to engage with NBNCo, multiple communications carriers and different levels of government to find a way to improve our internet and general communications in our area. We are on average just a 20-minute drive from the east coast, and around a one-hour drive from Sydney. Yet when it comes to communications it sometimes feels like we are out in the middle of a remote cattle station.

This area often seems to be overlooked regarding communications. As we are close to Sydney there is an assumption that we should be already well looked after in the area of communications. At the same time, we are too far from Sydney to get reliable internet and phone communications.

We have contacted a Regional Engagement Manager at Telstra, which at first felt encouraging that we were able to open a dialogue with Telstra, but unfortunately this channel of communication has fallen silent.

NBN used to have regional engagement roles and we have spoken to someone in a similar role, but sadly they do not have a detailed understanding of the local area and they are not familiar with the technical details of the rollout.

We have also reached out to our local Federal Member of Parliament, but there seems to be a lot of confusion of what avenues of potential funding are available to us. For example, we were incorrectly told that the next round of Regional Connectivity Program (RCP) funding is closed where in fact it is not.

Next, we have approached Regional Development Australia (RDA) only to be informed after they met in private with NBNCo that we should just wait until the NBNCo Fixed Wireless Tower for Yarramalong is completed later this year, even though we know it will only cover a very small area and number of premises. When we mentioned closing dates for applying for funding, we were told there will always be other funding options next year.

In relation to the Regional Connectivity Program, we think there should be a guide to applying for it or a provision of assistance, perhaps even an education package delivered to the various levels of government to explain the program and how to apply.

## Landline

Out here we are generally a resilient bunch, but in prior floods at least the phone lines worked during a power outage. This is no longer the case. We typically experience these floods once every 2-3 years, and we're usually without power for 7 or more days during them.

Speaking to some of the long-term residents, they felt a little more anxious this time around, as they used to be able to check in on each other via the phone/landline. This time many were trapped in their properties with no form of communication with the outside world.

The local Telstra exchange used to have a longer runtime on battery backup, but it now seems that this backup system has degraded. Usually something in the exchange fails during a power disruption causing the exchange to be offline, often for days after power is restored. We have been informed by technicians that they are often sourcing second-hand parts to keep the exchange going.

Many of the aerial phone lines are lying on the ground, some have been hung up on fences to avoid being cut when the grass on the roadside is slashed.

There are sections of aerial phone lines that have had temporary repairs carried out that have remained permanent, there is an example of one repair that used a smaller gauge of wire than normal, which resulted in ADSL no longer working for houses past this junction.

Considering this appalling state of affairs, we would like to know what the long-term plan is for phone services in the valley, as NBN Co recommends we keep our phone lines connected in case of emergency, but it appears they are not being maintained to a level suitable for emergency use.

There are some local landowners involved in the Alternative Voice Services Trials Program. Their experience has not been great, with the solutions requiring multiple cobbled together pieces of hardware requiring constant reboots to maintain a connection. Some of these solutions also rely on SkyMuster. Given the lifespan of roughly 15 years of these satellites that were launched in 2015 and 2016, these new services will already be obsolete by 2030. We would like to know what the long-term plan for these services is, as well as the long-term plan for SkyMuster and if there are any plans in place for their eventual replacement.

## Internet

Most homes in this region still use ADSL connections for Internet. Besides the small area in the village that will get Fixed Wireless later this year, the rest of us have been consigned SkyMuster. This widens the digital divide. And for those users, they are used to lower monthly costs and lower latency service like those on the coast who are getting NBN Fixed line services. It feels like we are getting a low latency service taken away from us and replaced with a high latency, more expensive service.

Others who have moved to SkyMuster, have either moved back to ADSL, or now must run multiple 4G services from two different providers alongside SkyMuster for when they need to perform highly interactive tasks online. There are many work-from-home systems that require a latency of less than 300ms.

There are many locals attempting to work from home as well as educating their children from home due to the pandemic-related restrictions over the last two years. Our local schools have limited the amount of online content due to the limited access many families have to reliable internet. This once again highlights the digital divide between our locals and those living only 20 minutes away on the coast.

On top of that, digital connectivity is extremely important to run local businesses and establish new businesses. In the past, some local shops needed to close for days at a time due to being unable to accept electronic payments. To further stimulate the local economy proper digital connections are essential.

Our understanding is there is no obligation for Telstra to continue to maintain the local ADSL DSLAMs. Usually during a power disruption something in the DSLAM or exchange fails when power is restored. We have been told that often parts are scavenged from old DSLAMs to keep the ADSL system operating. The link to the exchange is also often congested during the evening peak, often slowing ADSL down to 1 or 2mbps.

After the last ADSL outage (between 20<sup>th</sup> and 25<sup>th</sup> of March 2021) many locals started using 4G and those that were already using 4G for their internet found that the performance of 4G dropped off due to the sudden increase of users.

I have had Telstra perform a Widefeas Feasibility study which shows that I have Telstra fibre out the front of mine as well as many other properties here. This fibre was laid over 20 years ago, but now sits unused. Although I've been told the connection costs would be covered, the monthly fees would range from \$1,700 to \$2,500 per month on a three-year contract. It seems a shame that this infrastructure is sitting there unused and can't be made available at a lower cost.

I have also received quotes from other providers such as Vocus, who have said they could either re-use the existing Telstra fibre, or pull new fibre through the existing pits and conduits. As the service they would offer is high grade direct internet service (DIA) the costs are too high for the average consumer.

It is a great shame that over 20 years ago fixed line services were able to be delivered into our area, and now only a small 1km square area will receive NBN Fixed Wireless, while the rest of us will eventually be forced on to NBN SkyMuster once the ADSL service can no longer be maintained.

We would really like to be able to engage with NBNCo to investigate other options, of a fixed line service or additional towers for Fixed Wireless, we also have locals who have offered their properties as potential tower locations.

In addition, besides the target of 25mbps internet for all of Australia, we believe there should also be other measurable targets such as maximum unloaded latency and a maximum level of jitter, this will then provide a quality target for internet in Australia, not just a raw throughput target.

## Mobile

We now have mobile coverage, but due to the location of the tower, the coverage is limited and fails in a power outage. This is due to the tower relying on the local Telstra Exchange about 800 meters away. The battery backup power supply in the exchange has degraded over the years to the point that it now only lasts a couple of hours during a power outage.

Even though the 4G tower is relatively new and has a battery backup power supply that appears to last around 8 hours, it will stop functioning once the backup supply at the Telstra Exchange has depleted. It will come back into service on the rare occasion that a backup power genset is brought to the Telstra Exchange. The 4G tower will then eventually stop functioning again a few hours later as the backup power supply is depleted.

The 4G tower does have provisions for a backup genset but there is no permanent genset onsite. Due to the location of the tower, there is no physical access to the tower during flooding events.

We would suggest that a permanent backup genset is located at the tower site with remote start capability. In addition to a similar permanent genset located at the local Telstra Exchange as this facility is integral to the operation of the tower.

There are also some local landowners who would be happy to have a tower on their property to help in providing better coverage, we would prefer if the carriers would engage with the local community to discuss tower locations as there are multiple locations that would provide a better viewshed of coverage throughout the valley than the current tower locations.

## Education

We also believe that there needs to be better communications from NBNCo and from the RSP's regarding the different internet delivery technologies.

Many users are not aware what technology they are using, we have even found that some people thought they were already on NBN, when they were using ADSL. Others have been contacted by RSP's to migrate to NBN when NBN is actually not available at their location yet.

There are also some people who think their internet technology is WiFi, this is not helped when Telstra have television adverts that refer to internet as WiFi.

## Disasters

This region has been impacted by 2 floods and a fire in the last 18 months, and we are preparing for a higher-than-average rainfall and flood risk this summer. Without an effective and reliable way to communicate amongst ourselves as well as with lead emergency agencies, we are put at a higher risk. Our ageing, isolated demographic, new residents and increasingly Air BNB weekenders who are unfamiliar with the typography and/or how it is impacted by fires and floods coupled without a mode of communication puts our residents as well as first responders at risk. We have been left to come up with our own solutions to this problem, pushing us into the CB Radio network to keep our communities safe.

## Conclusion

After hearing stories from other regions during this review in a similar predicament, it seems our region is not unique in suffering poor communications. We understand that about 8% of Australia is suffering the same fate, having had fixed line services for decades only to have them replaced by a poorer substitute. It is as if as a nation we are unable to achieve what we had in the past, with cables stretching the nation and accessing some of the most remote locations of this country.

Meanwhile in some built up areas that are often well serviced by several independent fibre providers, NBNCo is busy rolling out duplicate fibre networks at the same time competing with these private enterprises to the point they may become no longer economically viable.

While it is undeniable that services such as Skymuster have provided a much better service to remote areas, these are usually areas that had no internet or very patchy internet in the past.

NBNCo was meant to level the playing field and provided similar digital connectivity for all Australians, when in the end it has done the opposite creating a huge digital divide while indirectly contributing to the demise of important voice communications in rural and regional areas.



## Contributors

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## Correspondence

The following contains a sample of email correspondence from our members regarding their experiences with local telecommunication issues, shared with their permission.

Hi Michael

Thanks for actioning this. We've been through satellite nbn, telstra 4g and now optus 4g.

Satellite nbn wasn't worth our time. With two people in the tech industry working from home the latency was terrible and the data allowance didn't even cover us for two weeks.

We switched to Telstra 4g which was good but simply not enough data (we've got a 4g antenna on the roof as well). We spoke to Telstra about their data allowance compared to optus a few times and their response was "We have a better network and if you don't like it you don't have to be a customer". It really didn't do anything for their brand.

We ended up having to go with Optus 4g for the 500gb a month but we do find we're going over that most months.

If there's anything I can do to help please let me know.

Thanks

Tom

Hi Michael

My Telstra ADSL service is pretty good. I don't have trouble streaming and I work from home permanently, and the wifi is in constant use with multiple devices running. I have a Smartmodem which switches to the mobile network if there are any outages.

About a year ago, before we got the smartmodem, Telstra advised I MUST switch to NBN, I waited 6 weeks and when the technician arrived he told me it won't work at our house. They gave me mobile wifi during the 6 weeks and it was fantastic. I wanted to keep up but they told me the price would be the same as the phone service. I have been paying \$90 per month and the data works well. I also have a VOIP phone included in that price with no charge for calls as it uses the internet.

My concerns are when they cut off the current ADSL what alternatives we will have, what the cost will be and what the service will be like. I agree with you, we are not remote and don't live in the middle of NT, so why are we being disadvantaged.

Thanks for doing this!

Regards

Kim Rook

## Correspondence (cont.)

Hi Michael,

Here's the story so far.

On Monday last week [REDACTED] (who is 79) had a medical emergency which required him to have a pacemaker installed on Thursday which now automatically corrects the arrhythmia which could have caused his heart to just stop. He is now recovered and feeling great, but it is very lucky that nothing happened during the flood!

With the pacemaker he was also given a bedside transmitter to send routine data from the pacemaker back to his specialist. We were alarmed when it started beeping madly yesterday and found out today that it was dependent on mobile reception, which we have never had at our place!!

Fortunately, we just found out a few moments ago that it will actually be possible to connect the transmitter with our landline which is good news (except when we lose the service during floods, fires etc.).

Clearly [REDACTED] will get now get priority status if there are problems and we are also running into others with pacemakers in the valley (not to mention other medical issues) so there should be a fair bit of useful data on the valley's ageing demographic that could support our case.

Cheers,

Libby

Hello Michael,

Thanks for the updates, looks like you have been busy.

I too are near the Telstar Tower just past Boyed's lane and during the last floods back in March 19<sup>th</sup> we had walked past the tower and had a peak only to discover vines growing in and around what looked like the venting area, I proceeded to pull what vegetation I could off and make it at least less intrusive , I also discovered that there was a power point to take an external generator ( because as you know when power goes done not long after the tower has not much battery backup and goes down) consequently we had lost all communication , landline, internet, mobile service etc , I do have a backup generator which kicked in and was able to get power and mobile reception due to us still having the old Yagi and smart antenna ( I never throw anything away and this is how we used to receive mobile reception and it stilled worked) Anyway when we could get out I went to Telstra and got up them and made them pay for a 4G satellite router so that I may get my business up and running and have since canned the ADSL2 internet (I'm still not sure if that's up and running) Also got Skymesh but not getting 100% worth from that yet (may need to up the package) While at the Telstra store I asked them about the Tower and how we lose reception when the power goes down and said to them that I was willing for Telstar to run a cable to my property at their expense and plug into my generator (I have three phase 85KVA generator) when the power goes down but they could not tell me how to achieve that !

Michael maybe you may know what the procedure would be for that ?

I am also on the Starlink list for the future outcome but since dropping ADSL2 my charges have increased to get the internet and may need to get even dearer, thanks for your work towards getting us some form of better and more reliable phone systems and internet and yes go figure that we are not recognised as a black spot or remote area, hope this will change for the better in the future sometime soon.

I am at \*\* just in case you did not know and when I moved here 21 years ago it took 18 months to get a second line for a fax line and 18 years to get a decent mobile reception, nothing happens in a hurry around here but I hope that may change, thanks again.

Branko Andrijic

## Correspondence (cont.)

Hi Michael,

I am on [REDACTED] since 2014; run a prof services business from here (as well as in Sydney); really poor services here from any provider.

As maybe is already the case, if you are looking for stories of poor broadband and mobile telephony services in this area, you will be inundated.

So, I won't load you up with more, suffice to say your understanding is correct and yes we need an action group to try to get something better to happen and be assisted by those with the capabilities to do so.

It is by no means impossible to run in-ground fibre throughout the local area; albeit challenging and expensive per user.

My view is that once the govt of the day adopted the "Fibre/NBN" plan and awarded NBN the contract, no such "too hard basket" excuses should have ever been entertained nor supported.

I'm sure there are (secret) metrics the NBN Co use to explain to polities and others as to why they have not/will not service an area like this fibre; BS as far as I am concerned.

My Opinion:

1. The satellite options may be promising for the future, but at this stage/foreseeably are useless or not available.
2. Fibre to pragmatically placed nodes around the area is the minimum realistic option to get any kind of equivalent service to the rest of the Country.
3. Even better; running along the all the Yarra Village streets and main thoroughfares throughout the district to each addresses copper node plus the option for user pays to have the fibre installed to their home modem or whatever the equivalent device is needed.
4. I could live with specially crafted service plans that somewhat reflect the challenges for such a small user base that reflect these fibre options, however whatever those service plan costs may be, they would have to be priced to reflect the cross subsidisation the rest of the Country's users enjoyed in the original roll out. I don't want to hear any economic arguments for silly connection or monthly service fees.
5. Hypothetical - I wonder if someone like Slater & Gordon would run a representation of all Australian homes that are in a similar situation to the Valley.....why have we been denied something all other Aussies have been afforded?

Regards

Michael

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