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Regional Telecommunications Review

Livestock SA represents sheep, beef cattle and goat producers throughout South Australia. These producers are increasingly expressing concern and frustration that instead of any improvements, regional telecommunications in South Australia are steadily worsening.

Initially those producers in remote and some rural areas of South Australia whose children use distance education were pleased when lessons were able to be conducted online and by videoconferencing. The SA State Council of the Isolated Children Parent's Association is now reporting that good internet access is now not always available and with the demand for this from others in the community, that children are starting to miss out with slow access and limited data capacity available. Students that are enrolled with SOTA (School of the Air - Port Augusta) receive all of their curriculum through the internet so it is not only their on-line lessons that are suffering but also their curriculum delivery.

However it is not only the more remote areas of South Australia that are suffering from deteriorating telecommunications. The Vice President of Livestock SA, Jack England who farms only 300 km by road from Adelaide has summarised the situation in a public letter (published in various regional newspapers in South Australia as well as the Statewide *Stock Journal*, June 24 2015, plus featured on ABC regional radio stations):

Letter to the Editor

While people in both urban and rural Australia get excited about high-speed internet access via the National Broadband Network, spare a thought for those of us who don't even enjoy mobile coverage, let alone modern internet services.

Several highly productive rural areas in the South East, including my district of Keilira, have been left in the dark ages. We are without any mobile service and have only fickle internet access, which despite being supplied by 'latest and greatest' NBN satellite network, is barely on par with dial-up speeds of the 1990s.

We are told that the next round of 'black spot' mobile phone funding projects will be announced in the next month or so but it seems we will be overlooked once again. In the meantime, we are missing out on countless business and technology opportunities and remain at far greater risk in emergency situations. Whenever there is a car crash, a truck roll-over or a bushfire in our district, the situation is ever more dangerous because we can't even access the emergency repeater frequency on main roads to dial 000.

It is the sort of isolation in a populated area which simply isn't acceptable in this day and age.

At Keilira we are paying \$240 a month for two home phone lines. We would happily disconnect our landline but given the absence of a mobile network, we have no choice but to maintain our home phone. Of course, we are also paying for mobile phones which only work when we are away from home.

Even our landline connection is unreliable. It runs above ground in neighbouring paddocks and the line is evidently a tasty treat for cattle to chew on. For the past decade, we have consistently lost access to our home phone for two or three weeks each year.

On such occasions when the landline fails, Telstra very kindly diverts our calls to my mobile – which of course doesn't get any reception. Local technicians know that if it isn't the cattle causing the outages, hot weather, rain in the exchange boxes or power failures can also be to blame.

Farmers like us are forking out at least \$1000 for a simple antenna just to try and improve the situation.

Some are being forced to buy Yagi 14-16 dbi directional antennas and legalised repeaters which cost between \$800 and \$1800. This might give a bare-minimum mobile signal in the house but it isn't feasible for everyone. No wonder some locals have even been tempted to buy illegal repeaters from overseas to boost their own signal at home, even in the knowledge that it further diminishes the network capability for other users.

I believe we could consider the feasibility of cost-sharing arrangements, whereby local landholders top-up any available government funding to help ensure we get the coverage we need. Instead of paying \$1000 each to improve our own house service, it would make more sense if locals contributed a similar amount to be put towards actually achieving adequate coverage, not just around our homes but in the paddock and on the roads as well.

We need common-sense solutions, like utilising newly erected broadband towers, where appropriate, to increase mobile phone service. In the same vein, we should gauge the likely cost to Telstra for retrofitting existing state-owned towers, such as those used by the Country Fire Service. There are many towers along the ranges in our area that only service a single purpose but could easily be retrofitted with repeaters.

As it stands, each CFS volunteer has a pager which has an up-front cost of \$220 and members have to pay a further \$144 a year to rent the pagers, while also swallowing the significant costs incurred for batteries and whenever a pager needs replacing.

Farmers, most of whom are CFS members, should be allowed to provide mobile phones as in-kind replacements to the existing pagers and then direct the savings towards upgrading the mobile network. This would be a win for the phone companies, our businesses and families, the CFS, its volunteers and, perhaps most importantly, it would mean we could respond to road accidents and fires more efficiently and effectively.

I know similar problems are being experienced elsewhere in the South East and it is time we as landholders took proactive steps because it seems government is not listening. I have asked the Federal Member for Barker Tony Pasin about this but have yet to receive a response.

I note Malcolm Turnbull recently visited parts regional South Australia to talk about what he is doing as Federal Communications Minister. Let's hope his tour amounted to more than just a fly-in, fly-out stopover to talk-up what the Coalition is supposedly doing in rural black spot areas.

I'm sure your readers will appreciate why further political grandstanding without any tangible improvements in our local area will not be looked upon kindly by silenced farmers in my district and surrounding areas.

Jack England, Keilira

As telecommunications is a Federal responsibility, it is pleasing that the Australian Government is rolling out the NBN (including satellite services) and has a mobile black spots program. However South Australia appears to be missing out on both of these, and in the latest round of Federal funding South Australia will get just 11 out of 500 almost new or upgraded mobile base stations that will be built around Australia with six of these to be based in the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara (APY) Lands in the State's Far North.

The Federal Government is blaming the South Australian Government for this situation. Livestock SA finds it disingenuous for the Federal Government to run a mobile blackspot program that requires a co-contribution from State governments when telecommunications is a federal responsibility. It appears to be nothing more than a cost shifting exercise. And furthermore, given the few that were allocated to South Australia, but for example Victoria are receiving a total of 110 towers, with one Federal Electorate - Indi - alone receiving 30 towers, this begs the question is this nothing more than a classic case of pork barrelling? There need to be clear guidelines on allocation.

Perhaps it is time for producers and rural communities to take matters into their own hands and to re-consider the virtual stranglehold that Telstra has on regional telecommunications. For example, there are a few companies that are allowed access to the Telstra network – in some cases limited only to the old 2g (or CDMA equivalent) network but these companies might get the impetus to install their own towers which could tie in across the Telstra dominant regional areas.

Things are getting beyond the joke in many parts of South Australia. Where Telstra refuses to upgrade (apparently have not collected fault records for the past five years), change has to come from other companies forcing their hand.

The Australian Government's Agricultural Competitiveness White Paper has acknowledged the need for better mobile phone and internet coverage. In developing the White Paper not surprisingly communication coverage was the issue most often raised by the agricultural sector as reliable mobile phone and internet coverage is critical for the future growth of agriculture. But sadly as Jack England has indicated, even landline services are unreliable and failing in parts of rural South Australia.