



# **ACCAN Position Statement on regional and remote mobile coverage**

April 2013

## Background

The mobile phone is arguably more important than the fixed phone line for personal and business communications in regional and remote Australia. The advent of the smart phone with Internet access has revolutionised communications, offering those with reliable coverage untold opportunities to engage with the digital economy. Mobile communications offer those in regional and remote areas numerous opportunities to improve their personal well-being and business productivity. As the mobile phone, and in particular the smartphone, becomes an increasingly essential tool in the modern world, it is critical that all Australians have reasonable access to a reliable mobile service.

The Australian Communications Consumer Action Network (ACCAN) has advocated on behalf of its members and regional and remote Australians on the issue of mobile coverage for a number of years. In 2011, ACCAN made a submission to the 2011-12 Regional Telecommunications Review (the Sinclair Review) recommending, among other things, that mobile phones be included in the new USO requirements; that strategies be employed by the government to expand mobile coverage in regional areas, and that different technologies be explored to expand coverage, including pilot programs of innovative initiatives.

The Sinclair Review notes that “over two-thirds of people through the submissions process raised poor mobile coverage as a priority issue, and it was the most common concern raised at every one of the regional consultations”. In regard to this finding, the Sinclair Review made a number of recommendations relating to mobile coverage, including the development of an auditing and reporting framework on problem mobile coverage areas; a co-investment program to expand the mobile coverage in regional Australia, and that NBN Co should engage with mobile carriers about using NBN fixed-wireless towers to also improve mobile coverage.

ACCAN believes the government has a vital role to play in improving mobile coverage in regional and remote Australia. ACCAN notes the Mobile Connect program of 2008, which aimed to extend terrestrial mobile phone coverage to priority locations, drawing on advice from the Regional Telecommunications Independent Review Committee. While this program offered subsidies of up to 100 per cent of capital costs, no applications were received from mobile phone companies. As the government explains, this indicates that carriers are at, or very close to, the limits of their commercial interest in further coverage, particularly for locations with no accessible backhaul.<sup>1</sup> This highlights the requirement for government intervention to address the problem.

Mobile communication is a highly effective and convenient way to participate in today’s digital economy. As demand for access to broadband through mobile devices continues to increase, the time to work towards improved mobile coverage in regional and remote Australia is now. If

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.archive.dbcde.gov.au/2009/july/mobile\\_connect](http://www.archive.dbcde.gov.au/2009/july/mobile_connect)

regional and remote Australians are left without access to mobile communications, a great deal of economic and social opportunity will be lost.

## **ACCAN engagement with regional and remote mobile communications**

Since its submission to the Sinclair Review in 2011, ACCAN has engaged broadly with its members and the public on the issue of mobile coverage. Indeed, ACCAN has recently launched a smartphone app that allows users to log where they experience poor mobile coverage. The app received a large amount of media interest, which is a clear reflection of the importance of mobile coverage to the Australian public. One journalist in Victoria utilised the app to investigate mobile coverage along the Calder Highway, being the main artery to and from the northwest of Victoria, and found that mobile coverage is 'hit and miss' along the highway, with a number of localities having no reception at all.<sup>2</sup>

A recent engagement with the NSW Farmers Association revealed that for their members, the number one issue relating to telecommunications is mobile coverage. A 2011 survey of its members found that 'rural Australians are at a severe disadvantage due to poor mobile phone coverage', and recommended, among other things, that both mobile and fixed-line phones be considered an essential standard phone service, and that the government invest to expand mobile coverage. The NSW Farmers Association is particularly concerned that with so much focus on the NBN, the importance of mobile coverage and smartphone technology has been largely forgotten in rural telecommunications policy.<sup>3</sup>

ACCAN recently held an Indigenous consultation workshop in Alice Springs to discuss the priorities for Indigenous communications. Mobile phone coverage in remote communities was raised as a priority issue, due to the fact that in remote communities fixed-line phones in the home are uncommon and mobile phones are the preferred communications device.<sup>4</sup> In remote Indigenous communities, take-up of broadband services in the home is also low, with most people accessing the internet through their mobile phone where possible, though many residents have to travel outside their community to obtain coverage. For members of the workshop, mobile phone coverage is considered the most appropriate way to improve communications in remote Indigenous communities.

As a member of the Broadband for the Bush Alliance (B4BA), ACCAN has engaged with a number of stakeholders on the issue of remote mobile coverage. Improvements to remote mobile coverage is at the forefront of the B4BA strategic focus, with a strong commitment to exploring

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<sup>2</sup> [http://www.weeklytimesnow.com.au/article/2013/04/04/565429\\_national-news.html](http://www.weeklytimesnow.com.au/article/2013/04/04/565429_national-news.html)

<sup>3</sup> NSW Farmers: Telecommunications issues in rural NSW, 2011 Survey.

<sup>4</sup> [http://www.tangentyere.org.au/publications/research\\_reports/MobilePhone.pdf](http://www.tangentyere.org.au/publications/research_reports/MobilePhone.pdf)

and advocating for innovative and practical solutions to improve mobile coverage in remote parts of Australia.

Further to the engagement with mobile coverage described above, ACCAN has received a considerable amount of contact from the public on this issue. A resident of Yeoval, NSW, recently contacted ACCAN to voice his concern over mobile coverage in his area, particularly in relation to the affect it has on effective emergency services during dangerous bushfires. From our broad engagement on the issue of poor mobile coverage in regional and remote Australia, it is clear this is an issue that will continue to be raised until such time that a commitment is made by federal and state government to address the problem.

## Findings

ACCAN's engagement with regional and remote Australia regarding communications has continually highlighted to us the importance of improved mobile communications.

Extended coverage not only improves the safety and well-being of people living in remote areas, it also allows greater participation with the digital economy. With the availability of internet access through mobile devices, extended coverage not only means the ability to make and receive calls, but also provides the capacity to engage with the digital economy. This allows regional and remote Australians to conduct business, access essential services, and more readily participate with Australian society.

It is clear to ACCAN that the government must act now to ensure that regional, rural and remote Australians are not further left behind in the area of mobile communications. ACCAN believes it is critical that regional and remote Australians are able to take advantage of the smartphone revolution in order to maximise business productivity and build personal capacity. In line with the Sinclair Review and ACCAN's own consultation with its members and the public, ACCAN has developed five key recommendations.

## Recommendations:

ACCAN recommends that:

- Regional and remote mobile communications receive a targeted strategic focus and policy from the government.
- The government undertake an in-depth study of regional and remote mobile communications, including what existing infrastructure can be utilised to extend coverage. Particular attention should be paid to the Broadband for the Bush Alliance (B4BA) discussion paper: 'Extending remote cellular mobile communications'<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> <http://broadbandforthebush.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/Extending-remote-and-rural-cellular-coverage-May-2013.pdf>

- The government commit to a benchmark for towns and highways to have reliable coverage.
- A co-investment initiative between federal, state and territory governments be investigated to provide the infrastructure for mobile carriers along major highways and towns with permanent residents of more than 300 people.
- The government include mobile communications as part of National Broadband Network policy.

ACCAN and its members believe improved mobile coverage in regional and remote Australia to be an urgent requirement. Improved mobile communications has the potential to bring a range of social, cultural, and economic benefits to a section of Australia's population who are at risk of social and economic isolation.

ACCAN is committed to working towards improved outcomes in mobile communications for regional and remote Australians and looks forward to working with its members, industry and the Commonwealth Government on this important matter.