

Further action needed for regional Australia to stay connected

Further investments to promote greater choice and availability for mobile phone users as well as improving the reliability and affordability of telecommunications services are vital to ensuring regional Australians are guaranteed access to essential telecommunications services, according to the Australian Communications Consumer Action Network (ACCAN).

The recommendations come from the peak body for communications consumers' submission to the 2021 Regional Telecommunications Review. This triannual process examines the telecommunications landscape in regional, rural, and remote Australia to identify paths for improvement.

"Since the last review was held in 2018, regional Australia has weathered, fires, floods and the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic," said ACCAN Deputy CEO Andrew Williams. "These events have shown just how vital telecommunications services are to all Australians, but in particular those living in our regions."

During emergency situations access to reliable communications is essential, and the resilience of communications infrastructure plays an important role in helping to protect members of the community. To better protect Australians, ACCAN is calling for telecommunications to be recognised as an essential service in legislation nationally, and for all mobile towers in remote areas to receive extra backup power supply to last between four to seven days.

Throughout the 2019-20 Black Summer bushfire season evidence suggested roughly 1,400 telecommunications facilities were directly or indirectly affected between December and January. The average outage was three and a half days, the longest was 23 days.

"Currently, only Queensland specifies telecommunications as an essential service at a state level. If we had nationwide recognition of telecommunications as an essential service, this would mean that telcos could better maintain phone towers and as one example get priority access fuel to power generators during outages to keep Australians connected during emergencies," explained Mr Williams.

While investments into programs like the Mobile Black Spot Program and the Regional Connectivity program have had some success in better connecting regional Australians, ACCAN still has concerns about the accessibility of phone and internet services in the country's regions and the quality of service being delivered.

"We understand that mobile network providers are at a point where they're seeing diminishing returns with building additional mobile towers," explained Mr Williams. "We would like to see the Mobile Black Spot Program fund open access mobile towers that allow all mobile providers to offer coverage to consumers to promote choice and improved access in the regions."

Additionally, ACCAN believes the Program should fund technology like boosters, repeaters and other equipment that can be used to extend coverage but can be out of the reach of some consumers due to their cost.

"Consumers in the regions deserve to be able to choose their mobile provider, and not just be stuck with the default option. If the government were to prioritise neutral host infrastructure models this would increase competition in communities that have traditionally been serviced by only one provider."



The peak body for communications consumers would also like to see digital inclusion addressed through the Regional Telecommunications Review, by addressing recommendations on affordability, digital literacy, and accessibility for people with disability.

“We know that consumers in regional, rural and remote Australia spend more on communications than their city counterparts so that they can stay connected,” said Mr Williams.

“People in the regions are more likely to have additional equipment such as mobile boosters, to carry two handsets for different mobile networks, and to pay for multiple broadband services such as NBN Sky Muster and ADSL at the same time. This redundancy can be very expensive.”

ACCAN’s proposal would together with other initiatives see the creation of a targeted concessional NBN broadband service to support low-income households, supported by a gap payment from the Federal Government to keep the retail price at \$30 per month.

ACCAN’s 2021 Regional Telecommunications Review submission also highlights the need to address the issue of the reliability of phone and internet services. The current draft Determination for standards, rules, and benchmarks for Statutory Infrastructure Providers, such as NBN Co, allows providers up to a maximum of 14 business days to connect consumers in rural areas, and up to 19 business days in remote areas. ACCAN believes that these timeframes do not reflect the essential nature of the service and risk leaving rural and remote consumers without service for an undue length of time.

“Not only are these timeframes for connection far beyond what consumers would expect from an essential service, but it’s proposed that networks only have to meet these lax timeframes 90% of the time. This means that networks can miss service levels in 10% of cases without facing consequences,” said Mr Williams.

“To have 1 in 10 consumers left waiting for weeks at a time for a home phone or internet connection is simply unacceptable and does nothing to incentivise the industry to prioritise reliability of their services.”

Connectivity problems in remote Indigenous communities also continue to be an important issue that requires more attention from policymakers. ACCAN’s 2020 Remote Indigenous Communications Review indicated that Indigenous communities are among the most disadvantaged and digitally disengaged in the country, with rolling lockdowns exacerbating the pre-existing digital divide. ACCAN supports the development of an Indigenous Digital Inclusion Plan that enables communities to develop local strategies and place-based solutions to increase internet access.

“An Indigenous Digital Inclusion Plan should be co-designed and co-lead from First Nations peoples, communities and Indigenous organisations. While work is progressing in this area, the delay in getting to this point has been frustrating for Indigenous consumers and advocates. It’s time for action from policy makers on closing the digital inclusion gap for Indigenous Australians,” closed Mr Williams.