# ACCANect 2018

**Session 5: 10:10 – 10:20am**

**Regional Telecommunications Review**

**Presenter: Sean Edwards, Chair of the Regional Telecommunications Review Committee**

**In this session, Sean Edwards will provide information about the 2018 Regional Telecommunications Review. The Committee will be reviewing telecommunications services in regional, rural and remote parts of Australia.**

**10:20 – 10:30am Q&A**

Julie McCROSSIN: Please welcome, Sean Edwards. (APPLAUSE)

SEAN EDWARDS: Well thank you very much for having us all here

this morning and it is indeed wonderful to participate in this

conference. I'd like to thank Uncle Ray for such a warm Welcome to

Country and acknowledge the custodians of the land on which we all

meet today, the Elders past and present and those emerging and

any Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander participants here with us,

I pay you the respect in which when we meet you deserve. I also

would like to thank Teresa and her team of ACCAN. Not only for

making us welcome here today, but also for their participation in our

review of which we're in the final stages of preparing our report. As

many of you would know, the review is undertaken every three

years and it is at arm's length of government and to be up here and

stand and talk to you now following a futurist, it's a bit difficult

because I'm a revisionist. Because we have had to go and have

a look at what's happened in the last three years and while Mark

more like a politician than he would want to be, was very political in

his answer of my question, because if he had of answered my

questions we could of all gone home. That is, who is responsible for

roll-out and how do we fund it? The answer to that is a perplexing

one. But we did conduct this review with a little bit of a difference

in the fact that the major infrastructure project in Australia, the NBN

program is well under way unlike three years ago. And in today's

fast-moving digital environment, this body of work is more

important than it ever has been. One of our key priorities was to

ensure that those living in regional Australia are able to maximise

their economic and social benefit, that the next generation of

telecommunication services can provide and make sure that they

have access to it now and into the future. The review has certainly

had a critical role to play in helping ensure no one is left behind

during this unprecedented period of digital change. That saying of

not leaving anybody behind has come to haunt us. Importantly, this

work will provide a vital avenue for people living and working in

regional, rural and remote areas to have their say and to have had

their say about issues that affect them. Now we heard earlier from

the Minister for Regional Communications the Honourable Senator

Bridget McKenzie who appointed six members to the review

committee on 30 April this year. I obviously has had a late night.

We have Ms Wendy Duncan, Ms Johanna Plante who is the deputy

chair and former member of ACCAN and obviously well-known to

a lot of you in this room. Ms Robbie Sefton, Kylie Stretton and Paul

Weller and those committee members have worked over a fairly

arduous itinerary around Australia, every State and every Territory

for the last 2 months preparing what we think will be a fairly

important piece for equality of services in the bush. The problem

that we have in meeting here today on this day is that we haven't

tabled our report, so I'm somewhat constrained in what I will be

able to talk about and we've still got quite a way to go before we get

to our final draft. But bear with us. We did get under way over that

period of time with some comprehensive public consultation

schedules and those schedules took us - that schedule took us

around to those places which I would argue would capture all the

issues in regional Australia as we saw it. Those places reflect

economic activity. Those places reflect remote locations. They

reflect regional locations. We went into places where we knew what

we were going to be getting into. We went into places which largely

don't have a problem as regional centres, but we wanted to hear

about what the benefits of being connected in those areas was. We

held our first consultation in the Northern Territory on 6 June and

our last two in Victoria on 31 July. 22 consultations as I've said.

We've had face-to-face conversations with business communities,

governments and the community organisations which exist within

those regions. They've all be able to express to us a common need,

being able to access and utilise reliable and quality

telecommunications and the services that they provide in their daily

lives. The simple truth is that today, regardless of where you live,

participation in the digital world is no longer a luxury. It's an

integral part of every day life both socially and economically and the

review is part of a broader agenda to ensure that the regional rural

remote parts of Australia had equitable access to telecommunication

services. So we did get out to the bush. We did speak to all those

people and as you would understand, there was a lot of them that

were aggrieved at the things that they felt were inequitable and I've

got to say, largely the committee fell into agreement with them. So

the demand for quality telecommunications services in regional

Australia has never been greater. You go to Kalgoorlie-Boulder

where they're developing mines you go to Bairnsdale where you

have specific agricultural needs. There's not a place, whether you're

in Cairns or Albury, any of those places across this country, never

before has there been such a demand for services in rural and

remote area. So we've heard it all before and it's no stranger to you

people here, is that Australia is grappling with its insatiable appetite

for data. It's obviously those things that we are trying to pursue in

this report into addressing these issues. So the other things that

come up - sorry, I'll just put all of these up, whoops, sorry. That

was very polite. So the year on year growth in demand in data is

putting pressure on regional telecommunications network. That is

absolutely no stranger to you people here. Sorry, I'm just having

a few problems with my clicker. But the other issues that we had,

and it extends right across a demographic of people from the age of

about 40 through to retirement age and beyond is the alarmingly

low levels of digital literacy and that exists in regional communities.

That exists, I suspect in the city, but we weren't charged with

a review of the city. As well as broadband we looked at the mobile

coverage for people living and working and travelling in regional and

remote areas and the coverage in these areas has had a long

checkered history of being patchy and unreliable. These areas were

a keen focus of what we looked at. Unless there is

a game-changing technology that fundamentally orders the business

case for investing in more remote areas of Australia, co-investment

currently remains the best solution to improve mobile coverage.

The current government's Blackspot Program has been successful,

but obviously has its shortcomings around regional Australia. The

next steps are the submissions. We've been delighted with the

responses that we've had. We've had an response amount of

response to that, written and to our public consultations and the

next steps that we will be making in this will be to provide

government with a report which hopefully will provide not only

a commentary, a health check on where we are today in today's

regional delivery of telecommunications services. But hopefully this

committee will step outside its comfort zone a little bit and which

I have broad support for, in trying to provide some sort of roadmap

to some solutions as to how we achieve that. So I thank you, and

I have probably 7 minutes of questions.

JULIE McCROSSIN: Thank you so much Sean, that was amazing.

Give him a round of applause please. (APPLAUSE) Questions, or

comments. Thank you very much and I'll come to you as quickly as

I can and if you can introduce yourself and I hold the microphone.

>> Mary-Ann Sinclair, Northern Institute, Northern Territory and

thanks very much going to Katherine, that's amazing. Everyone

forgets Katherine, I come from Katherine. You have mentioned

remote a number of times, but seem to be focusing on regional. I'm

just wondering what your comments specifically are about those

remote areas? Many of the areas I work in, there is no Internet,

there is no landline. They're missing opportunities for developing

enterprises and all sorts of things, so you can comment on that

please?

SEAN EDWARDS: Yeah, sure. The first thing I would say is there is

Internet in Australia. Now there is a change called Sky Muster

which I don't need to introduce you to in this group. But clearly, it

was designed 10 years ago, it had nothing in mind for what was

today. If you were a futurist in 2011 talking to the then shadow

minister for telecommunications who became the Prime Minister,

nobody could have known what they were facing. Mark did

obviously, he understood what the capacity was required and he's

now haunted us with 8K video downloads at 85 megabits per

second, which largely across this country doesn't exist. Clearly if we

want to watch the Tokyo Olympics we're going to have to have

access to an 8K vision system. Remote is better than it ever was

and I'm not an apologist for it, because you've got 10-year-old

technology trying to deliver at low speeds. It is vastly inequitable.

There is no way you can compare my unlimited download 50

megabit per second in Adelaide to a Sky Muster service out the back

at Oodnadatta or Katherine or any of those areas. So remote is

poorly serviced, regional is poorly serviced and you don't have to

drag her away, it's okay.

JULIE McCROSSIN: I just want to give her a quick right of reply.

She's come all the way from Katherine. You just wanted to

comment, I think.

>> A lot of the areas that I work in haven't had those services. We

invited NBN to come out and tour around communities in the East

Arnhem Land area. They put their money where their mouth is and

paid for a high-level satellite technician to come out and the NT

manager and we are working very proactively with them to address

some of those issues in some very remote areas. I'd love for you to

come up and have a look for yourself.

JULIE McCROSSIN: Just name some communities?

>> Areas like Galiwinku, Ukala, and they go on and on.

SEAN EDWARDS: The cost of getting service there and why

everyone avoids you and the cost of the delivery and the amount

you get delivered is just minimal in comparison to the rest of the

country.

JULIE McCROSSIN: I'll give her a final comment. She's come

a long way.

>> We are working through that with the NBN and there are

solutions we're developing collaboratively.

>> Thank you, my name is Dean, I'm on the ACCAN Board. I'm

just wondering from your review how many people with disabilities

were involved and what lessons did you find? What do you think

needs to be done to address that?

SEAN EDWARDS: Quite right, Dean. There's a distance in equity

for people involved in health in trying to get better health outcomes

in all of those areas. So the cost of getting those services is higher.

The services delivered are inferior and, therefore, the access to

health outcomes, good health outcomes for people with any kind of

disability or anything off the stroke of normal is inferior in rural,

remote and regional areas.

JULIE McCROSSIN: Did you want a follow-up, I think he was more

asking what did your review do in relation to these matters?

SEAN EDWARDS: It became very clear as part of every community

review, the Emergency Services, health, ranging from mental health

to national disability provision even though it's got funding, it was

access. There's funding for servicing those people, but we couldn't

get access to it in those areas. So in one way, one government

policy is assisting in this area. But delivering it was unable.

>> Bruce. Bridgetown, Western Australia, regarding people in

Katherine not getting the service. They pay the same taxes as the

people in Sydney, so they should be getting a similar service. We

also paid more per gigabyte than other people, we should be getting

much better service. Also, we need to make sure that attitude

didn't permeate through the review, because also regional and rural

and remote were an afterthought in this review. When you look at

Western Australia, the Katherine and Kununurra sessions were

planned on about a week and a half's publication as an afterthought

when it was realised they were launching the conference in Darwin

and even today if you check the website, the West Australian

sessions in Bunbury, Albury there was no press releases or

advertising. At the Bunbury session it was concentrated on a people

that lived in a city that had 60,000 people not on rural and remote.

If you go back to that map of Western Australia, about 90 per cent

of regional, rural and remote Western Australia did not get

consultation and it wasn't advertised.

JULIE McCROSSIN: A quick reply, we're nearly at morning tea.

SEAN EDWARDS: I won't get between the crowd and complex

carbohydrates. I refute a lot of that. I did a lot of radio. You were

at the hearings. Most of the stakeholders were contacted by the

defendant. Some places people didn't bother to turn up. We can't

make people turn up and put them in a headlock. We were

delighted by the turnout. It was by far the largest roll-out of public

attendance in any of the reviews that have ever been conducted and

we think that we're very confident that we've captured all the issues

which we were tasked to do.

JULIE McCROSSIN: I'll give him a quick right of reply. Again, a big

traveller.

>> Again you said the stakeholders were contacted, but the NBN

rep that was there, the Telstra regional manager, the Optus person

and the government departments, they have their input through

government systems. Joe Blogs doesn't have the input. They are

the stakeholder. The review should be trying to find out what

problems they've got, not the person who lives in the city.

SEAN EDWARDS: We heard from a lot of Joe Blogs to use your

phraseology and I'm confident we've captured those. I've dealt with

the public all my life and key themes are continually emerging.

There was very few themes outside the 22 consultations that

weren't consistent. There were new things, but as I say, I'm

confident and look, you might say that government can talk to

government, but there were a lot of people that worked in State

Government, local government and community organisations that

did come and express themselves whereas they never have in the

past, so I'm glad that we've captured them.

JULIE McCROSSIN: Very quick, we're literally at the end.

>> Keith from Internet Australia, it's not so much a question as an

observation. This is the fourth regional telecommunications inquire

or review committee. They happen every three years. Most of the

easy stuff has been done. Increasingly we're looking at the really

difficult, intractable stuff and I think you probably found that as

you're going around, but I also think the tenor of some of today's

questions reflect that as well. So thank you.

JULIE McCROSSIN: Thank you so much. Sean Edwards, would you

please give him a warm round of applause. (APPLAUSE) Now guys

we're going to have a 30-minute break. When you hear the bell if

you could leap with surprising electricity into this room and if you

don't have a lucky number, tap me. I'll warned amongst you while

you have morning tea, because there'll be a lucky draw at exactly

11 with a $50 prize. Thank you.