JULIE McCROSSIN: Ladies and gentlemen, it gives me pleasure now to welcome our next speaker who is the CEO of the National Farmers' Federation, Tony Mahar. He's going to talk obviously about regional, rural and remote community Coalitions and his qualifications are in business, economics, and an MBA in business policy. Please welcome, Tony Mahar.

TONY MAHER: Good afternoon, everyone and thanks so much for the opportunity to talk to you this afternoon. It is really an important issue -communications -as discussed and we're going to try to give you an update on rural, regional and remote areas coalition which is something the NFF is a strong supporter and partner with. 30 seconds quickly on myself, I happened to be lucky enough to lead the NFF. I've been at the NFF for seven years and worked around food and agriculture all my life so it's a real passion of mine. I love the job, I love the organisation and the industry and rural and regional Australia. I am very lucky. It's a challenging frustrating job as most of our jobs are... frustrating at times.

JULIE McCROSSIN: Tony, do you remember the service providers from rural and regional all had different shoes. Tony has elasticised boots and they're more clean than an urban man's shoes.

TONY MAHER: Not sure that what that says about me... but thanks.

JULIE McCROSSIN: I meant that as a compliment. You have values around cleanliness.

TONY MAHER: Yes, most of the time, I think. That's enough about me. About the organisation for those of you that don't know the NFF is the peak body that represents farmers and agriculture across the country, so our members are organisations. We have about 36 members and they're State farming groups. NSW farmers, for example, and then we also have the commodity groups. So, dairy, rice, grains, horticultural, red meat, wool... who have I missed? Pork. So, all of those organisations are members of ours and have individual farmers as members and through that we develop policies and programs that try to make agriculture and farming and through that rural and regional communities a better place. That's our remit is to really push policies and programs that make farmers and agriculture more productive and hopefully more profitable and obviously one of the key issues to do with rural and regional communities and remote communities is communication. It's very much central to our policy and advocacy position. We've got a small organisation based in Canberra close to arguably the most important decisionmakers and that is government. 16 people, smallish organisation, but we like to think that we have a reasonable profile and some reasonable influence and connections. I'll touch on that later. The importance of relationships and partnerships to us is really important. I've got a few slides. I'll try not to bore you, I know it's after lunch and one day until the weekend. Really quickly, most of you will know that in 2016 the RRRCC was formed to highlight the collective concern around access to reliable quality telecommunications particularly in rural and regional remote Australia not only to farmers. It's really important to us and we always try and recall that farmers are one part of the supply chain, an important part for us, but we really do rely on connectivity, communications and cooperation right across the supply chain. There's no point one part of the supply chain having really good communications or tele connectivity we've got to have that across the supply chain to try to make that value chain work. So, the idea of forming the RRRCC was to bring like-minded groups together and again, that's a consistent theme for us. We really need partnerships and Coalitions and partnerships to get stuff done and the aims were to build positivity around the communities that connectivity can bring, inform decisionmakers like government and other stakeholders about the concerns that were facing rural and regional remote communities and that again is really important and it has been for me, the great achievement and the great demonstration of what we can collectively do with organisations that might not necessarily have been partners come together and really align and optimise in a way "exploit" is probably not the right word, but really just demonstrate how we can work together and those clear opportunities. So, encouraging stakeholders to come together, raising awareness and importance of connectivity as I said and to develop joint positions on relevant issues, coordinate public relations strategies, share information -all of those things. We have over the last three years seen great energy from rural and regional communities and the membership has grown now reaching 21 bodies including NTCA, which I see are on there. For the RRRCC, obviously telecommunications has been the major priority and that again aligns very much with the NFF in terms of our priorities. We take the role of the secretariat really seriously and for us it's a clear demonstration of what we can achieve together. We think that the advancement of the telecommunications has to be an ongoing discussion for us and we see it being a really key part of our roadmap. We have in the last 12 to 18 months developed a roadmap for agriculture to reach $100 billion in the next 12-15 years. If we agree the industry is valued in $60 million in farmgate value currently we've set ourselves a target to find an extra $40 billion in the next 12-15 years and that's a fair ask if we look at the current situation of the devastating drought that continues to occur right across most parts of the country. Droughts are familiar and regular occurrence on the landscape unfortunately, but if these sorts of things keep happening our target of reaching that $100 billion farmgate value by 2030 is going to be severely compromised. One of the key parts that we're putting a lot of importance on is the value of connectivity and digital infrastructure data that we can as an industry rely on, leverage and make sure that farmers have all the tools that allow them to be more efficient, more productive and ultimately more profitable in their businesses. Again, that goes right across farms, right across the value chain so it's a key part of our platform and that platform very pleasingly is now the new narrative for government. We thought that it might get some traction and we've been genuinely delighted that it is now the new narrative. So the Prime Minister, banks, institutions, unis all now quote the NFF plan for a $100 billion industry. It's probably exceeded our expectations if I'm really honest, but we're going to run with it and we're going to make sure we do everything we can to deliver on that. The pressure is now on us that everyone thought it was such a great idea. It's now for us to deliver which is going to be interesting in the next 12-15 years. In terms of what's on the agenda and what sort of things we've done, as I said when the coalition was formed we had a few key ideas and they were five goals around supporting measures for equitable connectivity for rural and regional communities and we noted as a group of individuals who experienced issues and problems facing regional communities on a daily basis we were able to define the on the ground problem and come up with solutions that would work. Again, that's another key part of what we try and do. We try to advocate and push policies, but ultimately it's up to us to come up with solutions and go to government and say, look, we've got a problem but here's something we've prepared earlier, here's what we think might work and ultimately whatever colour government is in on the day, if we're able to deliver solutions and try and map out the future for them, often that's a lot easier and a lot more successful. So, accompanying each of the main policy goals we've produced specific asks that would help achieve the overall objectives of the coalition and these include bipartisan support for telecommunications package, technology neutral USO that provides access to voice and data, transparency and accountability around the standard services to provide it to rural and regional communities, mobile blackspot funding which has been a consistent part of the government's contribution in the last couple of years, an increased data allowances that allow the creation of satellite business plans. So, how are we going against some of those plans? We're going okay. We've partially achieved the first one, ongoing work, partially achieved the third one and I'll go quickly through some of those. We've made significant progress. There's been highly effective action, again collectively, across all of those goals through the membership and we're really well respected. I know next Tuesday the coalition's coming to Canberra and there's I think 25-odd meetings that we've got scheduled in. Again, demonstration, illustration of the seriousness of the issue and the value in coming together as a group. The government has committed to the continuation of the USO contract until a genuine alternative for the delivery of the voice service can be identified and in response to the 2008 regional telecommunications review the Government's also making significant investment through stronger rural regional digital connectivity package which includes a range of includes including mobile blackspot funding and 60 million for a new regional connectivity program. So, we are in a reasonably good place in terms of government commitments and recognition of the RRRCC. The plans have been a direct result of the advocacy of the RRRCC. Sky Muster Plus released in July exempts essential Internet use for uses such as browsing, banking, email and software updates from monthly data allowances, meaning these activities won't be slowed down once a data limit is reached and allowing businesses and families to stay adequately connected and functioning. Additionally, nbn Sky Muster business satellite service to be rolled out this year will cater for businesses outside of the nbn fixed footprint and utilise the capabilities of Sky Muster services. The services will be providing business-grade Internet data, voice service to rural and regional businesses and offered in addition to the existing wholesale products and these services help towards closing the gap between rural and metropolitan families and businesses, of which we heard a little bit about prior to my presentation. So, in terms of where we're going, the new goals, in the last three years we've made significant progress against some of the goals originally established and we want to reinforce that the coalition acknowledges that investment and some of those achievements, but we want to keep working with the new government, new members, new ministers on challenges. This new document which some of you have probably already seen has got new goals in there. Five revised goals and a total of 15 specific asks and we want to make sure that that is communicated next Tuesday and we get recognition and commitment to some of those goals. We have seen significant progress in initial ask for fit for purpose Sky Muster satellite services through the implementation of Sky Muster, Sky Muster Plus and nbn businesses and we'll continue to advocate for Sky Muster enhancements, but no longer require a specific goal for the issue. ACCAN has produced some research on the distribution of social and economic disadvantage in RRR communities using the available research and data, which identified there is a strong economic and social case for the provision of greater services to support individuals and families and our re-aligned goal number five asked for affordable communication services for rural, regional and remote Australia, concessional services for low income residents and support for and access to affordable equipment. I'm going to try to wrap it up, maybe some questions. Again, next Tuesday the 17th RRRCC are undertaking a delegation to Canberra and it's a busy time there. I've been up at Parliament House a fair bit this week, so it's going to be busy as I said, about 25 meetings. Really hectic, I know how hectic they are and it is a real credit to all of the organisations that are able to turn up. The value in coordination is really important and we did hold a similar delegation in 2017 which was really well-received and that clear demonstration of a strength and of a united, clear and coordinated voice which is something that we at the NFF try to do regularly. It's easy to say, harder to do a lot of the time, but if you've got a clear central component core values that everyone subscribes to, we can all sing from the same song sheet then decisionmakers like government are left in no doubt, but also it makes it easy for them to implement policies, to be able to respond to rural and regional communities. Again, can't underestimate the value of a clear coordinated voice and I really hope that the delegation next week is successful. So, in terms of the next 12 months there's three priorities. First is to work with government and other volunteer organisations to help design the proposed digital tech hub. We've got some experience with farm hubs and tech hubs, but I was talking to Teresa before. I think that's a great opportunity to come together and prioritise the need for rural support services and this hub will include direct access to advice and assistance through multiple communication channels. It will provide staff with extensive knowledge of all aspects of rural and regional telecommunications including the set-up of equipment and services which is often the most difficult part, having bought a whole lot of IT myself recently the help to actually set it up is often one of the biggest barriers. Also, providing support into the wider design of the regional connectivity program. We're also looking to support the consumer safeguards review, providing feedback on part A which is redressing complaints and handling. Part B, reliability of telecommunication services and when the consultation on part C, choice and fairness of the retail relationship between the consumer and their provider begins later this year RRRCC will be involved in providing advice and recommendations on that, too. Been a busy couple of years, got a busy 12 months ahead, but I'm sure we wouldn't want it any other way. Before I finish, the NFF is 40 this year and we're having a celebration in Canberra on the 14th of October. We're going through our roadmap, that plan for a $100 billion industry. It's a 12-year plan, so we're reporting on the first 12 months of that plan and as I've said a couple of times, telecommunications, digital connectivity is going to be the key part of that journey towards $100 billion. I'd like to remind or make sure that everyone is aware of that opportunity in Canberra. It's going to be a really great week on 14 October. If you could possibly make it we'd love to have you there at the dinner and celebrate agriculture and the NFF for 40 years, our 40th birthday.

JULIE McCROSSIN: Thank you very much. A round of (APPLAUSE), please. (APPLAUSE) Time for one or two very quick questions.

>> Thank you so much. I have a question, on your first or second slide you said the $20 billion could be added to agriculture's bottom line with the full adoption of digital technology. What does full adoption actually look like in practice?

TONY MAHER: That's a really good question. The report came out of a report that was done by the research and development corporations and it was called Precision to Decision if you want to have a look at it. It sounds like you're already familiar with it. That was, in part, connectivity, the uptake of digital technology and I would say that farmers are eager to take up new technology and look for tools that are going to make their business more efficient. It's got a couple of parts to it. One is the connectivity and the coverage and the service. One is the accessibility to tech. The other key part for me out of that was, what do we do with all of that data? I'm of the view that we're collecting so much data in tractors, harvesters, headers, in drippers, in sensors, all over the place. How do we make most use of that data? The takeout of that report is if we're able to get away to smash all that data together and spit out something useful and we're able to share data amongst providers, so whether that's a blue tractor or a red tractor, or a Bayer or all of these companies that collect data that's the $20 billion pot of gold for me. It's got a few components and it's easy to say, much harder to do I suspect.

>> Bruce from Western Australia, the regional connectivity paper, the submissions closed on Monday. One of the criteria they were looking at was in areas that are not major urban as in 100,000 people or less. Yesterday the CEO of Optus commented on the far western NSW town called Albury, that would benefit under the proposal for example they put Wi-Fi in the main street which I don't believe is what the intention from the review and probably the accord, the group was to benefit something like that. It's more to do things in Sky Muster-type areas. What are your thoughts on the scope they have for that?

TONY MAHER: You're probably right. You think of Albury Wodonga, it's probably not the sort of area that you're wanting to focus on. It's a balance, it's a growth area possibly, it's got a reasonable level of service arguably, but I would say generally more remote than Albury Wodonga possibly.

>> Hopefully people's thoughts and submissions will get to you along that vein. Originally the cohort was pushing for capability of 25 megabits being capable of as the standard for Internet. It's not a standard, because there's no minimum baseline we can work from, what's the current wish list you've got?

TONY MAHER: Can I take that on notice and get back to you. I'm not quite sure.

JULIE McCROSSIN: Bruce is a former air traffic controller and I've been with Bruce for two days as the MC. The specificity and the deeply informed nature ­

TONY MAHER: Much more informed than me on that.

JULIE McCROSSIN: Unbelievable. First of all we want a round of (APPLAUSE) for Tony Mahar. Seriously, thank you very much. Best wishes for your time in Canberra, and a round of (APPLAUSE) for Bruce and his astonishing questions. (APPLAUSE)