



Hot issues

All we want in 2018 is #BetterBushComms

RRR Communications Coalition celebrates one year

By Teresa Corbin & Fiona Simson*

Anyone who lives in a rural or regional area knows the pain of poor telecommunications services. We often hear stories of people pulling their hair out trying to run businesses, apply new technologies and educate their kids on small data allowances and unreliable connections.

We heard your concerns and in November 2016, we formed the Regional, Rural and Remote Communications Coalition (RRRCC) with the goal of making 2017 the year to improve connectivity in the bush. In the past year, we have certainly made significant headway to achieve #BetterBushComms.

The commitment shown by our members has been incredible. We've met fortnightly, and while the connections on our conference calls haven't always been reliable, over the past year we have managed to have significant input and influence in a number of areas:

- Parliament is currently considering legislative guarantees that ensure all consumers have access to a network capable of delivering 25Mbps download and 5Mbps upload for all areas;
- nbn has doubled monthly data limits for Sky Muster satellite users;
- nbn local team was launched to work directly with rural, regional and remote consumers;
- Significant progress has been made in developing digital literacy tools;
- The ACCC's Measures to address regional mobile issues Paper was released following calls by RRRCC members for more to be done to address mobile coverage; and
- We attended more than 90 meetings with Federal MPs.

The good news is the RRRCC is now considered to be the go to authority on bush telecommunications issues by government and major telecommunications providers.

The RRRCC has grown from the 14 organisations, to now include 21 members representing agriculture, health, education, women, community and consumers.

It is significant that so many organisations have operated with a single voice over the past year and there is no sign of letting up. This is for good reason – there is still much work to be done!

Taking a positive approach

The intention of the RRRCC was never to complain about the state of telecommunications. Considering the issues, this would have been easy to do.

If you ask any member of the RRRCC why they joined, they would say it was because they wanted the chance to access the significant economic and social benefits of connectivity.

And the economic benefits are significant. A recent report from the Precision to Decision project estimated that unrestrained connectivity could bring an extra \$20 billion value to agriculture alone, with a flow on benefit of \$24 billion to gross domestic product. This of course does not take into account the added value of other sectors such as health and education.

2018 and beyond

Next year is shaping up to be just as pivotal as 2017, with the much anticipated plan for Universal Service Obligation reform, another Regional Telecommunications Review and the Department of Communications' Consumer Safeguards Review. The RRRCC will also continue its efforts advocating for the continuation of the Mobile Black Spot Program and the passing of the Telecommunications Reform Package.

Regardless of all these processes there is something more fundamental at the heart of the RRRCC – the need to raise awareness and shine a light on these issues. Next time a decision-maker develops a policy that relies on internet connectivity or mobile coverage, we hope that through our efforts they stop and consider that these may not be available to everyone, even though they should be.

It is time for change. With current services, some of the simplest applications such as internet banking or online tutorials are not possible for rural and regional Australians.

With improved services, rural and regional Australians could do so much more. This proportion of the community punches well above its weight in terms of its economic contribution to the country. Imagine the possibilities that improved connectivity would bring.

If you're interested in helping the cause, get in touch with your local MP and tell them you want better telecommunications services in rural and regional areas.

You can learn more about the RRRCC's policy objectives on the [ACCAN website](#).

*Fiona Simson is a Liverpool Plains farmer and the President of the National Farmers' Federation.