

13th April 2016

Committee Secretary
House of Representatives Standing Committee on Agriculture and Industry
PO Box 6021
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Dear Secretary

Thank you for the opportunity to make a presentation to your inquiry reviewing:

- improvements in the efficiency of agricultural practices due to new technology, and the scope for further improvements;
- emerging technology relevant to the agricultural sector, in areas including but not limited to telecommunications, remote monitoring and drones, plant genomics, and agricultural chemicals; and
- barriers to the adoption of emerging technology.

Gwydir Shire's written submission outlined the Council's concern regarding mobile phone coverage across the Shire. Mobile coverage includes the reliability to transfer data and as well as voice transmissions.

This lack of reliability within Gwydir Shire and, no doubt, many other rural agricultural communities as well, creates barriers for the agricultural sector.

From the attached coverage maps sourced from both the Telstra¹ and Optus² websites would tend to leave one with the impression that the coverage is very good within Gwydir Shire. This is not the case on the ground, in the paddocks.

A significant proportion of this Shire is without reliable and efficient mobile phone coverage, usually the most productive areas. The coverage maps used to to promote 90%+ coverage fail to ground proof the claims made because the coverage areas claimed must be notional without the many potential landforms that restrict the coverage. The maps need to accurately reflect the 'on the ground' coverage or it is extremely difficult to fix the problem. This level of evaluation does not seem important enough to the mobile providers to conduct the meaningful studies required.

¹ <https://www.telstra.com.au/coverage-networks/our-coverage>

² <http://www.optus.com.au/shop/mobile/network/coverage>

Although it is extremely difficult to anticipate the future of available technology, one thing is abundantly clear. The platform must exist to take full advantage of any future technology advances and this is not the case within large areas of this Shire, usually within the most productive areas.

In particular the inability to directly connect farm machinery to the internet across the Shire reduces the ability of agricultural producers to access global positioning technologies that require more than simply triangulation with satellites, remote monitoring and other services that would value add onto agricultural production.

The transfer of data is particularly important to maintain access to remote pumps, river heights during potential flood events, and the myriad of other examples where mobile coverage would aid in the running of an agricultural business.

As pointed out in the Council's written submission this Council was certainly encouraged to hear that the Federal Government has agreed to additional funds being made available to address the mobile black spot issue that exists, not only in Gwydir but across the agricultural area of Australia in general. However without ground proofing the coverage claims being made this may not adequately address the issue.

Access to a reliable mobile (voice and data) network is now a business necessity not a 'nice to have' option and this reliance on technological advances into the future will only grow in importance, not diminish.

Another area that is peripherally relevant is the opportunity to create a value added market string to the agricultural production bow. Although it is difficult for Australian rural producers to compete globally with costs such as the wages paid, the use of technology tends to negate this impediment as shown to date with the heavy reliance on technology in every day rural production. However the technological platform must be firmly established and reliable.

A recent report commissioned from the Regional Australia Institute by the Namoi Joint Organisation of Councils, which includes Gwydir Shire, highlighted the potential gains from innovation to be up to \$16 million for Gwydir Shire³ alone and much more across the entire region.

Many of the Namoi's Councils are traversed by the proposed inland rail. The potential to create an NBN Co optical fibre connection along the spine of the inland rail corridor should be explored. This would allow for the full commercial potential created by the proposed rail corridor to be realised. This fibre could then be used as the vehicle to fan out the service to the surrounding areas.

Finally, and I realise that this is outside your Committee's specific reference, the reliability of being able to meet market demands with reliable and reasonable all-weather access, is also an essential rural requirement just as important as improvements in the area of innovation.

³ Report attached page 7

Thank you for the opportunity to speak directly to your Committee's Terms of Reference.

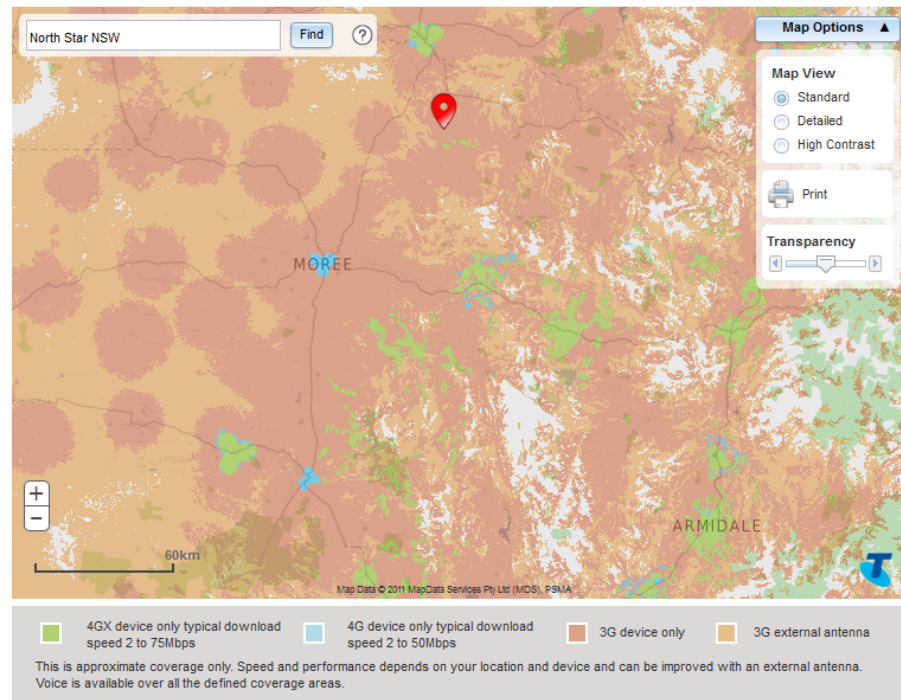
Yours faithfully

Max Eastcott
General Manager

Attachments

Telstra and Optus Mobile Coverage Maps

COVERAGE MAP



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