

Volunteer firefighters, councils paying for Starlink connections as poor mobile reception continues across WA

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ABC Midwest & Wheatbelt

Fires

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Fire brigades are using Starlink satellite units to stay connected. *(Supplied: Sarah Dring)*

In short:

Volunteer firefighters and local councils are buying Starlink satellite units to stay connected during bushfires in WA's Midwest and Wheatbelt.

It follows widespread mobile outages in December, which disabled crucial communications for volunteer firefighters.

What's next?

Advocates have called for a boost in state funding for volunteer bushfire brigades to purchase the required communications gear.

Volunteer fire brigades and regional communities across Western Australia's heartland are being forced to self-fund expensive satellite equipment, as mobile drop-outs continue to impact bushfire fights.

Widespread mobile blackouts during bushfires across the Wheatbelt in December were the latest example of firefighters left unable to communicate after mobile towers [lost power](#).

But in the Shire of Victoria Plains, around 160 kilometres north-east of Perth, a recent decision to fit Starlink units to five of the local fire brigade's trucks left communications intact.



Firefighters battled a five-day blaze which went through the Mogumber Mission in December. *(Supplied: Department of Fire and Emergency Services)*

The units allow for the vehicles to access high-speed internet through the Elon Musk-run company's low-earth orbit satellites, at the cost of \$20,000 for the installation.

Chief Bushfire Control officer Gavin Halligan said the units were the only way responders were able to communicate outside the fire ground during the five-day firefight near Mogumber.

"We managed to get choppers in, speak to DFES ... and keeping logistics up like water tanks on certain roads," he said.



Starlink units have been fitted to several volunteer bushfire brigade vehicles. *(Supplied: Shane Hart)*

The units' effectiveness has seen more country councils following suit, with the neighbouring Shire of Dandaragan planning to purchase two or three more units.

Further north, the Shire of Coorow is installing 10 Starlink units on its fire response vehicles, with help from a local gas company to meet the \$30,000 price tag.

Coorow Shire president Guy Sims said the region's history of poor mobile communications made the move unsurprising.



Coorow shire president Guy Sims says the new technology is essential. *(Supplied: Shire of Coorow)*

"Starlink is still a relatively new technology, but it's a technology that's proving itself," he said.

"I think it's going to become pretty well essential from now on."

Increasing reliance

The move continues a national trend of public and private consumers relying on Starlink for their internet and mobile services.

They include WA's Department of Fire and Emergency Services (DFES) which said its cache of Starlink units are "dispatched as required", including to the recent Midwest fires.

The increasing reliance on Starlink in Australia has drawn criticism about its unpredictable owner, Elon Musk. *(Reuters: Mike Blake)*

At least 375,000 Starlink units were connected across the country last year, according to federal government data.

The increasing reliance on the service within Australia has [drawn concern](#) about its potential to make the country more vulnerable to the whims of its unpredictable owner.

But Dandaragan Shire president Tony O'Gorman said reliable communications were the paramount concern.

"I think we all have concerns about Elon Musk," he said.

"The fact of the matter is it's the only technology that is available at the moment, and I will put the safety of our firefighters ahead of any idealisms that people have."

Shire of Dandaragan shire president Tony O'Gorman says Starlink provides a reliable extra line of communication. (*ABC News: Briana Shepherd*)

In Coorow, Community Emergency Services manager Mick Antony said volunteers were increasingly dipping into their own pockets to install the units.

"Communication is the highest priority, as well as the actual fire-fighting," he said.

"Everyone needs to be alerted. We need to get that information out."

Starlink directly competes with the Australian government's NBN satellite option.

Starlink, which is owned by controversial billionaire Elon Musk, has become increasingly popular in regional communities. (*ABC Midwest & Wheatbelt: Chloe Henville*)

However, the "Sky Muster" product will soon be replaced with a new Amazon satellite product, following a partnership between the tech giant and NBN.

An Albanese government spokesperson said it supported a competitive communications market and was investing to make mobile connectivity more resilient across regional Australia.

Funding shortfalls

With the state government not currently funding brigades' Starlink purchases, local governments are having to find other funding methods.

In a recent state budget submission, the WA Local Government Association said volunteer bushfire brigades across the state were

short \$42 million in unmet grant requests.

Bushfire Volunteers Association executive officer Shane Hart says volunteer brigades need more funding for appropriate vehicles and equipment. *(Supplied: Shane Hart)*

However, Bushfire Volunteers Association executive officer Shane Hart said it was a symptom of a broader funding problem.

"Many local governments still don't have the sustainable funding to purchase or maintain the equipment brigades need," he said.

"Eligibility is not the main problem, the funding model is."

A state government spokesperson did not address questions about funding, but pointed to \$69 million granted to local governments for bushfire mitigation since 2017.

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