



Dear Committee,

I am pleased to make the following submission to the Regional Telecommunications Infrastructure Review as the Independent Federal Member for Indi. I make this submission on behalf of the people living, working, and visiting my large electorate in North-East Victoria.

Australia's rural and regional telecommunications infrastructure does not deliver universal access to reliable, accessible, and affordable communications. The 2024 Australian Digital Inclusion index makes clear that regional Australia is less connected than urban Australia. Black spots, outages, network congestion, and slow speeds are something most regional families and businesses know all too well. We pay more for telecommunications than those in the cities, but we get an inferior level of service.

This isn't good enough, because good internet and phone coverage are as important, if not more important, for regional Australians than for those living in the cities. More than ever, we work online, we study online, and we access healthcare services online. We keep in touch with our friends and families online. But we can't do any of these things if we can't connect. And if we can't connect, we fall behind.

During emergencies and natural disasters, the stakes are even higher. While good communications infrastructure saves lives, bad communications infrastructure can cost them. This is a fact the people of Indi know only too well.

Which is why the work of the Regional Telecommunications Infrastructure Review Committee is so important. My position is unambiguous – the Commonwealth Government must do more to close the digital divide and ensure that all Australians can access reliable and affordable telecommunications services no matter where they live. Solutions won't look the same everywhere because regional Australia is diverse, which is why I am glad to see that the Review's terms of reference highlight the need for targeted and place-based solutions.

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Regarding the Terms of Reference, I have given close consideration to the following items:

4(f): the suitability of regional communications during emergencies and natural disasters, including reliability, resilience, speed, and coverage.

5(b): the changes or adjustments needed to existing Government policies and design and delivery of programs to ensure they continue to be effective; remain fit for purpose; are maximising the social and economic potential of regional Australia and of existing and emerging technologies; and deliver improved telecommunications outcomes.

I have also addressed the affordability of communications services for regional Australians, which was not directly addressed by the terms of reference – which was disappointing.

This submission was written in consultation with members of the Indi Telecommunications Advisory Group and includes the voices of Indi constituents who have contacted me regarding telecommunications issues in regional, rural, and remote Australia.

I wish the Committee success in delivering its final report.

Yours faithfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'Helen Haines', written over a large, faint circular watermark or stamp.

Helen Haines

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Regional Telecommunications Infrastructure Review Submission

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Summary of Recommendations

Recommendation 1: Establish ongoing funding of at least \$50 million per year for grant programs that fund community energy nodes and power backup for mobile phone towers, such as the Telecommunications Disaster Resilience Innovation (TDRI) program, the Mobile Network Hardening Program and the Strengthening Telecommunications Against Natural Disasters (STAND) program.

Recommendation 2: The Commonwealth Government must deploy an emergency mobile roaming network capability before the next severe fire season arrives, ideally before the end of 2024.

Recommendation 3: The final report must address the affordability of telecommunications in regional Australia and clarify what role the Commonwealth Government has in ensuring affordable access for people living in regional, rural, and remote Australia.

Recommendation 4: Provide rebates for the purchase of mobile repeaters and boosting devices for vulnerable individuals, such as those living with complex health needs or those living in areas with severe bushfire risk and inadequate mobile coverage.

Recommendation 5: Establish ongoing funding of at least \$75 million per year for the Mobile Blackspot Grant Program (MBSP). This is a vital program that should not rely on periodic top-ups from Government. Providing ongoing funding would enable stakeholders to plan for future rounds and result in better outcomes for regional, rural, and remote Australia. The Government must also implement the recommendations of the Australian National Audit Office to conduct a review of the MBSP within 12 months, and to review eligibility and selection criteria before each round of funding.

Recommendation 6: Establish a new grant program that enables local governments and industry to coordinate deployment of portable mobile base stations to address network congestion issues during festivals and busy tourist periods.

Recommendation 7: The new Universal Service Obligation must include not only fixed voice services, but fixed broadband services for home and business internet delivered as part of the National Broadband Network.

Recommendation 8: Extend the On Farm Connectivity Program for an additional two years and double funding to a total of \$60 million. Round One of this program was oversubscribed – and the Government must meet this demand with additional funding.

Recommendation 9: Make further investments in Business Fibre Zones and continue the deployment of upgrades to the NBN fixed wireless network.

About the Electorate of Indi

The electorate of Indi covers 29,000 square km and nine local government areas (LGAs): Alpine Shire Council, Benalla Rural City Council, Indigo Shire Council, Mansfield Shire Council, Murrindindi Shire Council, Strathbogie Shire Council, Towong Shire, the Rural City of Wangaratta, and the City of Wodonga. The electorate also includes the unincorporated alpine resorts of Falls Creek, Mt Hotham, Dinner Plain, Mt Buller, and Lake Mountain. Indi is characterised by diverse topographies, vibrant regional communities, and varied rural economies, including businesses in tourism, agriculture, forestry, viticulture, manufacturing, health, and social services. The people of Indi live in growing regional cities, rural hamlets and alpine settlements with unique characteristics and many shared telecommunications challenges.

Indi Telecommunications Advisory Group (ITAG)

As the Independent Federal Member for Indi, I steer the Indi Telecommunications Advisory Group (ITAG). ITAG is a consultative committee comprising the electorate's local governments, community members and other regional stakeholders. The group's purpose is to develop community-led responses to telecommunications challenges in our electorate.

Since being elected in 2019, I have secured funding for 13 new mobile phone towns in Indi, with four towers due to come online in 2024. Under independent representation, and in collaboration with Indi's nine local governments, we have secured more than 51 new mobile phone towers and received more funding under the Mobile Blackspot Program than any other Victorian electorate.

Regional telecommunications challenges

Regional communities face significant telecommunication challenges. From ongoing issues with mobile blackspots to network congestion during the tourist-season and inadequate disaster resilience and emergency redundancy, the regions require unique solutions and tailored funding programs.

I have fought for improved telecommunications in the Federal Parliament by introducing my Faster Internet for Regional Australia Bill in 2022. This Bill sought to guarantee access for regional Australians to fast, high-quality internet to the same standards enjoyed by people in the major cities.

Having consulted widely with constituents, community groups, ITAG, local industry and business representatives, and local government, I have identified a range of issues that the Regional Telecommunications Infrastructure Review Committee should address in its final report. They are centred around four key themes:

- 1) Connectivity in emergencies and mobile tower backup

- 2) Affordability
- 3) Mobile blackspots and network congestion
- 4) Connectivity for primary producers and businesses

Connectivity in Emergencies and Mobile Tower Backup

Indi is mountainous, heavily forested, and prone to widespread and devastating bushfires. Both the 2009 Black Saturday bushfires and the 2019/20 Black Summer bushfires impacted large swathes of the electorate. Indi is also susceptible to riverine and flash foods, with major river systems such as the Murray, Goulburn, King, Ovens, Broken and Yea Rivers traversing the electorate. Water catchments across Indi supply more than 50 per cent of the surface water to the whole Murray-Darling Basin – demonstrating its hydrological importance.

Unfortunately, Indi's heightened disaster risk means that power outages are frequent. In regional areas, the costs and inconvenience of power outages are exacerbated by their severe impact on telecommunications infrastructure and services. In Indi's more remote and mountainous communities, a power outage usually results in internet and phone outages as well. With limited power backup for mobile phone towers and internet, towns become isolated. During disasters and other emergencies, this is a serious safety risk.

In Murrindindi Shire, floods earlier this year damaged NBN infrastructure and caused power outages lasting long enough to deplete power reserves at critical infrastructure sites. This resulted in outages affecting everything from the NBN to mobile towers to ATMs and EFTPOS machines. In its submission to this review, the Murrindindi Shire Council highlights the impact of telecommunications outages on local hospitals, emergency services and businesses. The risks to patient safety and emergency service coordination were unacceptable, while the broader regional economic costs amount to the hundreds of millions of dollars.

During the Black Saturday and Black Summer bushfires, people's safety and survival often depended on whether a phone call got through to 000, or whether an emergency warning reached them in time. This was true for Grant and Alice Stinear who live in Buxton in the south of my electorate. They credit their landline for saving their lives during the Black Saturday Bushfires 15 years ago. When all other telecommunication services had gone down, and with the fire fast approaching, it was through their landline that the call to evacuate got through. Today, however, their landline has fallen into disrepair, and goes offline as soon as there is a power outage. Despite all the technological progress of the last decade, the Stinears are less confident than they were 15 years ago that a life-saving message will reach them when it is most needed.

This is a widely felt sentiment in Indi. I hear loud and clear from the community that regional telecommunications are inadequate, particularly during emergencies. Communities across North-East Victoria are not confident that networks will be resilient during natural disasters. When outages do occur, backup generators and batteries aren't lasting long enough. During the Committee's

consultations in Benalla in May, we heard loud and clear from local governments that we need longer-lasting power backup for mobile phone towers.

Jamieson

The alpine town of Jamieson provides a clear example of this need that exists across Indi, and the benefit that Government grants can provide to communities. In Jamieson, frequent blackouts caused by floods, fires and storms mean that the town is often isolated for hours or days at a time. Local resident Lynne Lutze describes the town's residents as "sitting ducks in the event of a bushfire", because the combined phone and power outages not only mean that members of the community are unable to call for assistance, but emergency volunteers are unable to call one another to coordinate emergency responses. The Jamieson Rural Fire Brigade has written to me regarding these issues:

"The combination of a power blackout and a phone blackout created an unprecedented challenge for our community organisation and for emergency services trying to check on locals who might be at risk because of fallen trees and a lack of power. Those vulnerable people would not have been able to call anybody. Worse still, our emergency responders could not phone one another to assemble a team to check up on the vulnerable. Even CFA pagers (which are supposed to be the back-up for our EM phone apps) were not working. We were very lucky that our Memorial Hall was made available 24x7 and had the recently installed energy node, so that power and lighting was available to residents."

- Peter Horan, Jamieson Rural Fire Brigade, 24 February 2024

Peter refers to the Jamieson Community Energy Node, a recently completed project delivering solar panels, battery storage and an EV charger for the Jamieson Memorial Hall. The community energy node provides two to three days of autonomous power in emergency situations. The project was funded by a successful grant application made under the Commonwealth's Strengthening Telecommunications Against Natural Disasters (STAND) program and the Black Summer Bushfire Recovery Grant Program. Local resident Ann-Maree Vague has said that energy node has made a big difference in the Jamieson community.

"During recent power outages, we have been able to open our hall 24/7 for community and business use, shelter, companionship, and communication with the outside world."

- Ann-Maree Vague, Jamieson Resident, 3 May 2024

This important piece of infrastructure has already been used by the community to provide a safe place in recent floods and power outages. Already this project is proving its worth. It is clear we need more community energy nodes. In towns like Corryong, Harrietville or Tolmie, they could save lives and provide regional Australians with safety during disasters and keep them connected to the outside world.

It is crucial to acknowledge that community energy nodes won't be funded by the private sector. Only Government can provide the leadership and the capital required to protect towns in the deep valleys

and high in the mountains. These communities need funding now, before the fire, the flood, or the storm – not after. I call on the Government to dedicate ongoing funding to programs like the STAND program and the Telecommunications Disaster Resilience Innovation Program.

Recommendation: Establish ongoing funding of at least \$50 million per year for grant programs that fund community energy nodes and power backup for mobile phone towers, such as the Telecommunications Disaster Resilience Innovation (TDRI) program, the Mobile Network Hardening Program and the Strengthening Telecommunications Against Natural Disasters (STAND) program.

Emergency Roaming Network

An emergency roaming system is a common-sense solution for remote mountainous regions like Indi. It would enable a phone to connect to any network during an emergency, no matter who your provider is. Frankly, it is not acceptable that in Australia, in 2024, your choice of mobile provider determines whether you can access emergency information during a natural disaster. The Vic Emergency app, for example, relies on a mobile data connection and we must have access to it during a disaster. During a bushfire or storm, regional Australians need to be able to make a call through whatever network is available.

In 2023, the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission’s Regional Mobile Infrastructure Inquiry final report found that temporary emergency roaming was technically feasible, but further work was needed to design and develop the capability. The Communications Minister asked her Department and the National Emergency Management Agency to report back to Government by March this year. It is now July and we’ve not heard any updates. The Government needs to keep moving with this crucial reform and deploy an emergency roaming network within the next year – my communities can’t accept further stalling, and neither can I.

Recommendation: The Commonwealth Government must deploy an emergency mobile roaming network capability before the next severe fire season arrives, ideally before the end of 2024.

Affordability

Regional Australians are paying more for phone and internet services than those in the cities, and often getting a second-rate level of service. Whether due to expensive additional hardware, reliance on satellite services or a lack of competition (where Telstra is the only game in town), affordability issues exacerbate the already significant digital divide between people in the cities and the country. This puts further pressure on regional communities already experiencing significant cost of living pressures.

In Indi, 50 per cent of people live outside the NBN wired network. For many people living outside of major towns, the only viable options for a reliable internet connection are private providers such as Starlink. These services, however, are significantly more expensive than services available to those living in cities or regional centers where the NBN is available.

Even when relying on the NBN or Telstra networks, people in the regions are getting dud deals and being forced to pay out-of-pocket for costly additional hardware, just because of where they live. A resident of Lilliput in my electorate faces network congestion. Telstra recently advised him to purchase a \$1600 boosting device to improve his Wi-Fi connection. He can't afford such a capital investment, so unreliable and inconsistent internet is his only option.

Hundreds of kilometres south, Sue Bilton of Toolangi requires a stable internet connection to run her allied health business. Unfortunately for Sue, Toolangi is not serviced by wired or fixed wireless NBN services. Despite living only 50 kilometres from central Melbourne, Sue has been forced to spend more than \$700 on hardware, and \$200 per month for satellite internet. Yet Sue still struggles with connection when the thick fogs roll in. This is an example of regional internet tax in regional Australia.

Sue believes all Australians, including those living in regional areas, deserve equitable telecommunications access, both in terms of quality and affordability. Currently Sue is getting neither, a sentiment that too many people in regional Australia share.

Grant and Alice, who credited their landline service for saving their lives in the Black Saturday Bushfires, have been forced to purchase a Telstra boosting device for their home at a cost of approximately \$1300. They've been forced to make this significant investment because they're "concerned that in an emergency we have no way of seeking help or being contacted if an emergency arises". They feel like this unfair cost burden falls onto regional Australians just because of where they choose to live. That's why I'm calling for the Committee's final report to address the affordability of regional telecommunications – it's a crucial issue and it can't be ignored.

Recommendation: The final report must address the affordability of telecommunications in regional Australia and clarify what role the Commonwealth Government has in ensuring affordable access for people living in regional, rural, and remote Australia.

Recommendation: Provide rebates for the purchase of mobile repeaters and boosting devices for vulnerable individuals, such as those living with complex health needs or those living in areas with severe bushfire risk and inadequate mobile coverage.

Mobile Blackspots, network congestion, and the Universal Service Guarantee

Unfortunately, despite significant progress, mobile blackspots are still a major issue for communities across Indi. Mobile blackspots limit the economic participation of households and can make regional communities less appealing places to live.

Blackspots aren't only an issue in the remote parts of my electorate. They impact larger towns such as Benalla as well. At the Committee's consultation event in Benalla, multiple Benalla locals expressed their frustration at having to make telephone calls outside their homes, despite living in the middle of town. This is so common that it has become a moment of neighborhood bonding, with neighbours waving

across the street as they make calls to friends and family, even in the middle of winter. In a town of nearly 10,000 people, this simply isn't good enough.

I recently heard from Adrienne, whose 81-year-old mother lives in central Benalla. After years of poor reception, Adrienne asked me:

“Why in such a large town like Benalla is there still problems with clear mobile phone connection... In this day and age this should still not be an issue. It has been quite a few years our family has struggled to get clear phone calls... Mum isn't getting any younger and all I seek is for us to be able to talk without Mum standing on her verandah when the temperature is 8 degrees.”

- Adrienne Sommers, Benalla, 9 May 2023

The Mobile Blackspot Grant Program (MBSP) is a long-standing and successful program – it has delivered hundreds of millions of dollars to regional communities and improved connectivity for communities across Indi. However, it relies on periodic top-ups from Government – providing no ongoing certainty for communities or industry. I'm calling for the MBSP to become an ongoing program with at least \$75 million available per year, which represents a 50% increase on the average of the program's first seven rounds.

Additionally, I want to see the Government implement the Australian National Audit Office's recommendation to conduct a review of the MBSP. I want to see that the Government is improving the program each and every round because we need to know that communities are being consulted and that funding is going where it's needed most. The importance of fair and equitable grant funding is something I have consistently pursued through my End Pork Barreling Bill, which I introduced to the Parliament in February 2024.

Recommendation: Establish ongoing funding of at least \$75 million per year for the Mobile Blackspot Grant Program (MBSP). This is a vital program that should not rely on periodic top-ups from Government. Providing ongoing funding would enable stakeholders to plan for future rounds and result in better outcomes for regional, rural, and remote Australia. The Government must also implement the recommendations of the Australian National Audit Office to conduct a review of the MBSP within 12 months, and to review eligibility and selection criteria before each round of funding.

Tourist season congestion

Indi is a popular tourist region covering the winter wonderlands of Mount Hotham, Mount Buller, and Falls Creek; the summertime oases of Lake Hume, Lake Eildon, and Lake Nillahcootie; and the year-round gourmet destinations and wine regions of the King Valley, Rutherglen, and Beechworth. While tourism drives the local economy, it also drives network congestion. In towns like Bonnie Doon, Bright, and Beechworth, the busy tourist season slows internet performance to unproductive speeds. The same happens when major festivals are held throughout my electorate.

Over the King’s Birthday weekend in early June, two fantastic annual events were held in my electorate, the Rutherglen Country Fair and the Rutherglen Winery Walkabout. While both events were a great success, network congestion and EFTPOS outages caused significant frustration for locals and visitors alike.

“This was a missed opportunity for our businesses (and visitors) on one of the busiest weekends of the year, and really highlighted the critical need for improved telecommunications right across the Shire... Given the importance of events such as these to our local economy, not to mention the safety implications of black and grey spots in our local network, this shortfall in service simply must be addressed.”

- Sophie Price, Indigo Shire Council, June 14 2024

Multiple local councils in Indi have told me that the Australian Government should make it easier for councils to access portable mobile base stations. Mobile base stations can be gamechangers for regional areas that do not necessarily require a new mobile phone tower, but do need increased telecommunications capacity a few times per year – just like in Rutherglen over the recent long weekend. If local councils were able to access portable base stations, they would benefit regional tourism. An added bonus could be increased network resilience during disasters.

Recommendation: Establish a new grant program that enables local governments and industry to coordinate deployment of portable mobile base stations to address network congestion issues during festivals and busy tourist periods.

Delivering a fit-for-purpose Universal Service Obligation

The Government must ensure its review of the Universal Service Obligation, now called the Universal Service Guarantee (USG), delivers for regional Australians that need to access communications for work, study, and healthcare. The current Universal Service Guarantee requires Telstra to provide standard telephone services (STS) to premises in Australia within reasonable timeframes and make payphones reasonably available.

Today, Australians rely on the internet for so much – and I believe every person and every household has a right to access decent and affordable home and business internet.

That’s why, in 2022, I introduced my [Faster Internet for Regional Australia Bill](#). I recognise the Government isn’t doing enough to guarantee regional Australians equitable internet access, so I introduced a Bill that would have required the NBN Corporation to guarantee a minimum speed of 25mbps for all households, at all times of day. My Bill wasn’t radical, and for most people in regional Australia it seemed like a common-sense proposal.

In 2024, I believe the new USG must expand universal service to include home and business internet, in addition to telephone services. The USG should not specify one technology over another but be flexible enough to ensure the most appropriate technology is used in each location, whether that be a wired NBN connection, a satellite connection, or fast-speed mobile data.

So I'm calling on the Government to get the new universal service guarantee right and include a right for all Australians to enjoy decent and affordable home and business internet.

Recommendation: The new Universal Service Obligation must include not only fixed voice services, but fixed broadband services for home and business internet delivered as part of the National Broadband Network.

Connectivity for primary producers and small business

Indi is a diverse agriculture region, producing beef, dairy, wool, grains, nuts, trout, tea, sheep, and hops. In today's agriculture sector, many of Indi's primary producers rely on agricultural technologies to compete with larger producers. In a rapidly changing climate, farmers need all the help they can get. However, poor internet access is inhibiting the adoption of emerging agricultural technologies and holding regional primary producers back.

Rebate programs such as the On Farm Connectivity Program are important and should be extended. These programs enable primary producers to make crucial investments that increase productivity and drive emission reductions and local employment. However, demand-driven grants such as the On Farm Connectivity Program are often oversubscribed. This is unfair and shows that there is untapped demand. The Commonwealth needs to invest more in such programs and ensure primary producers across regional Australia can benefit. That's why I'm recommending the Government double its investment in the On Farm Connectivity Program and extend it for a further two years.

Unfortunately, it's not just primary producers falling behind due to poor regional telecommunications infrastructure. I consistently hear from businesses in my electorate who struggle to access the basic connectivity essential for running a modern-day business. This holds businesses back and holds our regions back – businesses won't move to our regional towns and cities if the telecommunications infrastructure isn't up to scratch.

For example, a GP clinic in Mansfield was unable to make the switch to telehealth during the Covid-19 pandemic due to consistently poor bandwidth. To this day, inconsistent and unreliable internet is making it difficult to provide the best level of care to their patients.

In Baranduda estate outside Wodonga, Border Crane Consultants and other businesses have been left behind. They're not serviced by an NBN Business Fibre Zones and are forced to rely on fixed wireless services, which are unreliable and perform at well below the speeds modern businesses require.

Recommendation: Extend the On Farm Connectivity Program for an additional two years and double funding to a total of \$60 million. Round One of this program was oversubscribed – and the Government must meet this demand with additional funding.

Recommendation: Make further investments in Business Fibre Zones and continue the deployment of upgrades to the NBN fixed wireless network.