

18 April 2024

Committee Secretary
Senate Standing Committees on Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

rrat.sen@aph.gov.au

Dear Secretary,

Re: Submission to Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport References Committee inquiry into the Shutdown of the 3G mobile network

Costa Group welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport References Committee inquiry into the Shutdown of the 3G mobile network.

Yours faithfully



Michael Toby
Corporate Affairs Manager
Costa Group



About Costa

Costa Group (Costa) is a vertically integrated horticultural company, with farming operations in every state of Australia across more than 50 rural and regional locations.

Costa's farming operations cover 7,200+ planted hectares, growing, marketing and supplying a range of fresh produce, including:

- Berries (blueberries, raspberries, blackberries, and strawberries)
- Citrus (oranges and mandarins)
- Mushrooms
- Glasshouse tomatoes
- Avocados
- Table grapes
- Bananas

Costa is also a major exporter of fresh produce, including citrus, table grapes, avocados and blueberries.

Across its Australian operations Costa employs more than 5,100 FTEs.

Submission

Fresh produce has a significant economic footprint across regional Australia where circa 30% of our nation's GDP is generated. In many regional areas fresh produce growers are the major economic presence and the direct and indirect employment they provide generates a significant economic multiplier effect.

Costa is a key part of this footprint, operating in predominantly regional and rural locations, Costa is reliant on communications networks to efficiently and effectively operate its day to day business, which is principally the growing, harvesting, packing and transport of fresh produce.

A reliable and effective communications network (be it 3G, 4G etc.) supports and makes possible a number of business critical activities and tasks across our operations, which if they were not available, would jeopardise our capacity to both grow and supply fresh produce to Australian consumers.

For example, the 3G network makes it possible to control and monitor our crops, including the operation of irrigation, fertigation and other key production plant and equipment. Without these, our crops and especially the yield and quality will be compromised. The losers from this will be the Australian population, who would likely face shortages and increased prices for fresh produce as a result.

It also plays a crucial role in ensuring the health and safety of our workforce, many of whom must work in often remote locations, where access to a reliable and functioning mobile device is non-negotiable and must be available to them at all times.

Lack of certainty in meeting timeline for provision of 4G network and coverage

Costa's principal concern about the shutdown of the 3G network is the current lack of certainty as to whether our service provider will meet its timeline for providing the necessary access to the 4G network.

We are currently working through the Telstra 3G exit and the consequences of this for Costa and its operations. We have concerns that this will leave some of our sites with issues post the closure of the 3G network.

Our operations and workforce rely on mobile devices (phones, ipads) to carry out their day to day operational duties. For example, they rely heavily on the use of weather apps to understand and monitor short term weather patterns.

These devices are also used to monitor infrastructure across a particular farm, for example, in the case of a citrus crop, soil moisture probes are monitored remotely, 24 hours a day.

This is important in the context of water application, including being able to apply precise irrigation inputs. Mobile devices are also used to monitor irrigation alarms, namely identifying and signalling any faults.

Too much or too little water, can have catastrophic consequences for the plant and crop. Being able to monitor this remotely and continuously is therefore vital.

For Costa to continue to operate effectively, there must be some guarantee or at least an assurance that there will be no coverage gaps in areas where we currently use 3G. Some of the service coverage maps we have been provided indicate there is 4G coverage available in certain areas, however, the on the ground experience of our staff indicates otherwise.

Not only has there has been a lack of clarity, to date Costa has not been shown any plans relating to rollouts in the regions in which we operate. It would be helpful if this were to be made available, as at the very least, it would allow us to better manage the expectations and needs of our operations and workforce.

Infrastructure in rural and regional Australia must be of a standard and reliability, that it will allow business to utilise 21st Century communications, including mobile networks, both in the field and office. If agriculture is to realise its ambitious goal of becoming a \$100 billion sector, then it must have access to networks that enhances productivity, reduces costs and frees up capital to be invested more productively in activities which generate economic growth.

Those individuals, families and businesses that live, work, and operate in rural and regional Australia, and provide the much-needed products that underpin Australia's prosperity, do not deserve to be treated like second class citizens when it comes to accessing first world communication networks and services.

END.