



Mrs Julia Irwin MP
Chair
Standing Committee on Petitions
PO Box 6021
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Dear Mrs Irwin *Julia*

Telecommunications issues

Thank you for your representation dated 8 May 2008 regarding the concerns of residents of the Robertson electorate about *Next G* coverage and payphones. I appreciate the residents' concerns in relation to this important issue and apologise for the delay in replying.

Closure of Telstra's CDMA network

Following my decision in January to postpone the CDMA closure, Telstra responded quickly to put in place a rectification plan to address my concerns. Specific actions arising from Telstra's rectification plan included:

- the establishment of a dedicated hotline to assist customers not receiving equivalent handheld coverage;
- an accreditation program for Telstra shops and other major stores selling *Next G* products to train staff to better assist customers, provide better customer information and ensure stock availability;
- the engagement of Telstra Coverage Advocates to contact and/or visit customers at their premises with regard to *Next G* issues; and
- proactive mobile health checks to assist *Next G* customers with high levels of call drop-outs.

Telstra reported on 20 March 2008 detailing the effectiveness of the measures contained in its rectification plan and also provided supplementary information. I also considered stakeholder submissions, contacts from consumers and responses from state, territory and local governments.

I notified Telstra on 15 April 2008 that I was satisfied it had sufficiently rectified the problems I identified in January. Telstra closed its CDMA network on 28 April 2008.

Telstra operated its dedicated *Next G* hotline until 1 July 2008. The service is now available from Telstra's complaint line on 12 51 11. The Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA) will monitor the *Next G* network call drop-out rates and congestion levels over the next year and report any problems to me.

It is important for customers to understand that different mobile phones have different capabilities and how each phone performs on the network is dependent on both the network coverage and the particular device. Telstra labels *Next G* handsets that it recommends for rural handheld coverage with a 'blue tick', to make it easier for customers to choose the right handset. Sensitivity also varies within the range of 'blue tick' handsets.

CDMA customers need to do a 'like for like' upgrade by ensuring that, if they were using a car kit or external antenna with their CDMA handset, they use a car kit or external antenna with their *Next G* handset.

I encourage consumers with *Next G* queries or difficulties with their *Next G* equipment and services to contact Telstra in the first instance.

If consumers' problems are not resolved by contacting Telstra's hotline, they could contact the Department of Broadband, Communications and the Digital Economy (the Department) by phoning freecall 1800 883 488.

Mobile phone coverage

The Australian Government appreciates the importance of mobile telephony to Australians. However, the decision to provide mobile phone coverage is primarily a commercial matter for mobile phone carriers. In making the decision to extend coverage to a particular area, a mobile phone carrier will consider a range of factors, including site availability, cost structures, likely levels of demand from users and overall economic viability of the service.

Telstra has advised it has no current plans to extend mobile phone coverage between Mangrove Mountain and Wisemans Ferry.

One option for residents of the Robertson electorate may be to discuss their telecommunications needs with other mobile phone carriers, including drawing to carriers' attention the potential users of the services in the area. Contact details for the major carriers are attached.

It should be noted that it is not possible to obtain terrestrial mobile phone reception in all areas of Australia. There are a number of factors that can interfere with mobile reception and therefore affect a user's ability to obtain or maintain a mobile phone signal at any given time or in any particular place. These factors include mountainous or hilly terrain, road cuttings, buildings, tunnels and electromagnetic energy from other sources. While not all potential sources of interference can be overcome, consumers' service providers should be able to advise them about ways to minimise interference.

One effective way to increase coverage, particularly along country highways and in rural locations, is to use a properly installed in-car kit with an external antenna. The most appropriate antenna may vary between networks, and prices vary according to the quality. An antenna's performance depends on where it is fitted on a vehicle. To assist with maximising network performance and coverage, the antenna should be installed on the car roof. The roof provides sufficient height and stops the car from blocking the signal. These accessories can be readily obtained from mobile phone shops and dealers.

In areas that are sparsely populated or have little passing traffic, the only commercially viable option for mobile phone services is via satellite. Satellite mobile phone services cover the entire Australian landmass and population and are available from a number of providers.

Residents of the Robertson electorate may be eligible for assistance under the Government's *Satellite Phone Subsidy Scheme* (the Scheme) if they are unable to access terrestrial mobile phone networks. The subsidy provides up to \$1000 for eligible applicants who live in areas without terrestrial mobile coverage, and up to \$700 for eligible applicants who live in areas that have coverage, but spend significant periods in non-coverage areas.

Information about the Scheme, along with application forms, is available on the website of the Department at www.dbcde.gov.au/satphone. An information kit can be obtained by contacting the Scheme administrator on freecall 1800 674 058 or via email satphone@dbcde.gov.au.

Public payphones

The Universal Service Obligation (USO) provides that all people in Australia, wherever they live or work, should have reasonable access, on an equitable basis, to payphone services. Telstra, as the primary universal service provider, is responsible for meeting the USO. The Telstra Standard Marketing Plan (SMP) sets out how Telstra will meet its obligations under the USO in terms of installation, removal and relocation of payphones, as well as service quality and fault rectification standards. The SMP and information on Telstra's payphones is available at www.telstra.com.au/payphoneservices/index.htm. ACMA is responsible for monitoring Telstra's compliance with its SMP.

The criteria for the provision of payphones are specified in clause 3.8 of Telstra's SMP. Telstra will provide and maintain payphones on an equitable basis considering all reasonable financial and siting implications. Telstra assesses requests for payphones on a case by case basis. While the siting criteria are flexible, Telstra has an obligation to provide payphones, even if they are unprofitable, within approximately:

- 1 km of residential communities (including caravan parks and holiday units) in cities and towns with low home phone connection;
- 40 km of small villages and towns (including holiday areas);
- 100 km of state or national parks, where there are permanent facilities and regular park staff visits;
- 250 km of small service centres on highways and major roads in rural and remote areas where there is adequate mobile service;
- 200 km of small service centres on highways and major roads in rural and remote areas where there is inadequate mobile service; and
- small remote communities, including Indigenous communities if as a general rule the community has a permanent population of more than 20 adult residents, or 50 people in total.

According to Telstra's payphone locator there are up to ten payphones within 40 km of the Mangrove Mountain region. These are predominantly located on the Pacific Highway and Wisemans Ferry Road. However, four of the payphone locations are directly located within areas of concern to the petitioners at: 1590 Pacific Highway, Peats Ridge; 3468 Wisemans Ferry Road, Somersby; Morgans Road, Marlow; and 10 Wisemans Ferry Road, Spencer.

There are a further two locations in Wisemans Ferry itself at 2 Settlers Road and 2 Old Northern Road.

Regional telecommunications review

The residents of the Robertson electorate may be interested to know that the Regional Telecommunications Independent Review Committee (the Committee) is conducting a review of the adequacy of telecommunications services in regional, rural and remote parts of Australia. The outcomes from this review will play an important role in shaping future Government telecommunications policy, particularly for regional Australia. The Committee is due to report to the Government in August 2008, potentially identifying areas that the Government may consider for further action.

The Committee held an extensive public meetings program throughout regional Australia to inform it of the views and experiences of consumers, businesses and other organisations in these areas. Contributions from a broad range of stakeholders will help the Committee deliver a report that reflects the views of regional Australia and provides meaningful advice to the Government. More information on this review can be found on the website at www.rtirc.gov.au or by phoning freecall 1800 064 851.

Thank you for bringing the Robertson electorate residents' concerns to my attention. I trust this information will be of assistance.

Yours sincerely

Stephen Conroy
Minister for Broadband,
Communications and the Digital Economy

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