

Attachment 1: Submission re mobile phone coverage TWB Senator Conroy 14 Jan 2010.doc

The Gelantipy & District Bush Nursing Centre provides care for our community members and visitors. The area covered by our service is from Murrindal in the south to Suggan Buggan in the north. Care is provided in both the centre and in the home and we are first responders for Ambulance Victoria.

The centre is the hub of the district as there are no other community facilities, and a number of small isolated communities. The Centre publishes a regular monthly newsletter, which is important for community constructiveness, advising of events and health issues and reducing isolation. As in many rural areas, the population of the district is ageing, and the Gelantipy and District Bush Nursing Centre plays an important role in monitoring and supporting people to remain in their own homes. The Bush Nursing Centre has a community value far beyond the health and welfare services it provides.

During the fire communication was very difficult as there was no land line telephone services for 3 weeks post bush fire impact for some areas while others such as Suggan Buggan has only since mid April had their services reinstated.

Mobile service in this area is limited or none. There continues to be poor radio and TV reception in our area. The majority of residents only can get satellite internet. As a Bush nursing centre we did many home visits and held community bbq/meetings to get messaging consistent and to the whole community. As you can see by the attached letter not much has changed since the fires in our area during 2003 and the communications that was written in 2010.

The Bush nursing centre was also the central point for other services to access our community. We were also the coordinator for all relief aid, food and farming goods in the district.

### **Community preparation**

Community preparation was well supported by many agencies

Fuel reduction on road sides have been very poorly maintained over a number of years and lead to large fuel load that enabled the fire to spread a lot quicker

### **Victorian Government and emergency services preparation**

Fuel reduction of the road sides has been non existent for many years and this was evident by the extent of road side fires assisting the spread.

Many agencies worked well together prior to the fires in preparing the community

### **Community response**

Due to limited telecommunication during and post fire communications were very difficult and put a lot of pressure on the community

Not all the community listened and adhered to the self evacuation warnings, this maybe different when there is a next time

### **Relief activities**

Need to take into consideration local practice when it come to evacuation centres. Even though Buchan was not a designated relief centre this is were the majority of our community went. The recreation centre is not properly equipped for this. There was no back up generators, not even a fire hose. The local recreation committee had off their own back agreed for the building to be open to all residence from 21st November 2019, so there would be a cool safe place for people to go. The Rec committee also agreed to pay for the irrigation of the adjoining oval so there was a green area. There is no government support for this. Just a community provided facility.

The Orbost Buchan Road was the given road to take to go to the Orbost relief sight. Luckily some very good community people had advised others that this would not be safe. If this had not have been done we would have had many more fatalities.

Financial assistance was slow as they could not get the services to our area and the community were very hesitant to leave the area.

Donation of goods was very overwhelming. It became very difficult to organised and control this. It was a blessing when the East Gippsland shire gave us Suzie Healey (employee) to assist our community with the coordination of many things. Also Team Rubicon were here for a number of weeks which also helped alleviated this pressure.

█ have been very difficult to work with. They came into our community and were very demanding of our local facilities and did not listen to the wants and needs of our community. They we verbally abusive and bullying to a number of community leaders that had only the community's interest first. We needed to have some of our facilities for our community to use to get back to some normality. The █ and the different camp coordinators have all been very difficult to work with.

We have had a number of other groups of volunteers come into the community and have worked very well with assisting our community.

One difficulty has been the coordination of all the volunteers and matching them up with the jobs needed to be done in our community



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Member of Aged & Community Care Victoria

The Hon Stephen Conroy  
Minister for Broadband, Communications and the Digital Economy  
Parliament House  
Canberra, ACT 2600  
14<sup>th</sup> January 2010

Dear Mr Conroy,

Thank you for asking your advisor, Mr Carl Toohey to respond to the submission prepared by the Gelantipy District Bush Nursing Centre Inc. regarding mobile phone coverage in the Gelantipy District. I would like to point out in the first instance that the concerns and issues raised both in this letter and in the submission are those voiced by the residents of the District and collated by the Committee of Management of the Bush Nursing Centre, they are not purely my own personal views.

In response to Mr Toohey's letter of the 24<sup>th</sup> of November 2009, the Committee of Management of the Gelantipy District Bush Nursing Centre Inc. have asked me to respond on their behalf and on behalf of the residents of the district and visitors to the area, to draw your attention to the following issues:

## *Satellite Phone Subsidy Scheme*

Mr Toohey advised that there is a Satellite Phone Subsidy Scheme available and that Satellite telephony is a useful communication option to augment fixed and mobile services. In the case of this district it would only be augmenting fixed services as there is little to no mobile phone coverage.

Satellite Phones were trialled by the Gelantipy District Bush Nursing Centre many years ago and rejected for the following reasons:

The satellite phones that were trialled:

- would not operate inside buildings
- would not operate under trees
- would only operate with direct line of sight to the sky

For these reasons the Committee of Management decided they would be inappropriate as an emergency phone to contact a Remote Area Nurse when off duty, on the road or on home visits, as the only time they would have been of any use was while the Nurse was outside with a clear line of sight to the sky. The Centre opted instead for an SMR radio phone in the Centre vehicle, which does have coverage in most places in the district, but is not portable as it requires a strong antenna fitted to the car to operate effectively. While the centre could apply for the higher subsidy as a health organisation, our assessment of these phones is that they would not be of any use to the Centre.

A number of businesses in the Gelantipy and W Tree areas have recently trialled Satellite phones and have reported the following observations:

The Satellite Phones trialled:

- would not operate in smoky conditions (i.e. bushfires)
- were not secure and could not be used for credit card transactions
- could not be used for answering machines



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- could not be used inside a building
- must have direct line of sight to the sky in order to work

Following the 2003 bushfires, residents in Suggan Buggan had their telephone lines cut for a significant length of time and were provided with satellite phones. These phones also had to be left set up outside in order to work, and required power to operate, fortunately the people using them had solar power as mains power was also cut for some time after the fires.

The consistent observations of those in the district that have trialled Satellite telephones was that they were of little or no use due to these short comings. From a business point of view, unless these phones could be used inside an office or in smoky conditions they weren't worth considering. They were also expensive to use and even with the subsidy, the short comings and expense far outweighed their usefulness.

## *Emergency Warning Systems*

We appreciate that there has been an increased focus on emergency response systems in regional areas, having already experienced catastrophic bushfires in 2003. We are, however, extremely disappointed that the money invested in this scheme does not include funding for mobile phone towers. It appears that this part of the Emergency Warning System, in which warning messages are sent to mobile phones based on the location of the mobile phone would be of most benefit to this district, if only coverage was available. Obtaining government funding is almost certainly the only way our district will ever be likely to obtain mobile phone coverage due to the isolation of the residents and the lack of commercial viability for privately owned telephone companies.

For the residents of this district, the Emergency Warning System will have limited benefit, as in general people will only be warned if they happen to be sitting beside their landline telephone (and their billing address happens to match their location). The majority of the district residents are in farm based occupations and spend the most of their day outside working, rather than inside in reach of a landline phone. The bulk of the district has no mobile phone coverage, little or no radio reception\*, television reception is haphazard\*\*, there is no public address system, sirens, or signage and door knocking is unlikely to happen as most properties are kilometres apart, and no-one has been appointed to do this. It is all very well listing all of these alternative warning systems, but for this entire district these will either be ineffective or unavailable.

We are also concerned that the telephone warning message will only be delivered based on billing address of the landline phone; we consider the physical location of the actual telephone line to be a more appropriate address for a warning. Personally, for work reasons, I live in 2 houses, one in Buchan and one in Wulgulmerang (one hour away), my billing address is in Buchan so I would not get a warning if there was a fire threatening me once again in Wulgulmerang. Mine is not an isolated case, there are many holiday homes & farms which have landline telephones connected in this district with billing addresses as far away as Sale, Sydney, Perth & Melbourne. Due to the remoteness of this district, people with children in secondary school often live in a second house in Buchan or Bairnsdale to enable their children to access school. This is almost certain to be a widespread practice amongst people all over Australia with holiday homes and farm properties in different locations to their billing address.



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## Please Note:

\*The Victorian government accepted all of the recommendations of the Esplin report following the 2003 bushfires, including the one recommending that ABC radio be made more available in order for people to be able to access emergency radio broadcasts, however ABC radio reception in the Gelantipy District appears unchanged seven years later.

"23.32 - That CFA and DSE work with Australian Broadcasting Corporation Local Radio to identify black spots, and explore opportunities to further improve coverage for broadcasting emergency information. **Accepted.**" Victorian Government Response to the Report of the Inquiry into the 2002-2003 Victorian Bushfires  
[www.dpc.vic.gov.au/CA256D800027B102/Lookup/BushfireInquiryResponse/\\$file/bushfireresponse.pdf](http://www.dpc.vic.gov.au/CA256D800027B102/Lookup/BushfireInquiryResponse/$file/bushfireresponse.pdf)

\*\*Television reception in the district varies from house to house, some people only access Tasmanian, some access NSW or ACT and some have no coverage other than Austar satellite or Imparga satellite so many people cannot access any Victorian or local news and will not get emergency news warnings unless they happen to be broadcast Australia wide.

## *Commercial Considerations in extending terrestrial mobile coverage*

I (personally) have recently returned from Nepal where I travelled the road from Kathmandu to Chitwan National Park and on to Pokhara. This road winds through incredibly steep mountainous country, which was sparsely populated by very poor people and yet there was full mobile phone coverage almost all of the way along this road. Telstra and Optus inform us that it is not possible to get good coverage in our mountainous district due to the "challenging terrain", yet in comparison to Nepal our mountains are mere ripples on the landscape. A prosperous country like Australia with access to modern technology should be ashamed to be shown up by such a poor country as Nepal, obviously coverage in mountainous terrain is possible.

Currently a communications tower is located on top of Mount Seldom Seen, beside the Seldom Seen Fire Tower, which is powered by a large solar array. In the 2003 fires this communications tower survived and enabled UHF radio signals to get through to areas which lost telephone landlines for several weeks. This tower could surely be investigated as an option for a mobile phone tower as a very tall tower is already in place, it would cover a massive area in all directions and may only require an upgrade to the solar array rather than bringing mains power to the tower. There is a Fire Tower located in Bendoc with clear line of sight into Suggan Buggan, perhaps this is another area that could be investigated. There are also residents in W Tree living on top of a hill with 360 degree views and mains power available who may be approached in relation to installing a tower. To the best of our knowledge none of these options have been investigated.

We believe that Telstra investigated an option of putting a mobile phone tower on Mount Hamilton but there may have been issues with obtaining permission for putting a tower on public land and some issues regarding the cost of getting power connected to the site. Fire towers in general have 360 degree views, usually have communications available to them and some arrangement for power, so surely would be worthy of investigation for mobile phone provision into remote areas? We understand these towers are on public land, but in the case of remote communities, surely this public land could have its current use expanded as a public service if there is already a communications tower in place?



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Presently district residents requiring internet connections have only 2 options, slow dial-up on poor quality copper landlines or satellite. Most are opting for satellite connections, with each of these installations costing the government several thousand dollars in subsidies. If the Government subsidised a modern mobile phone tower for the district, satellite internet subsidies would be unnecessary, and these savings could be channelled into the cost of the mobile phone tower.

We understand that there will, in all probability, never be a commercial decision made by privately owned carriers to install mobile phone towers in the Gelantipy district. The reality is that the population of this District is not large enough for any private operator to justify the cost of installing mobile phone towers, even when they take into account the numbers of their own customers passing through the district as tourists. The Government made the decision to sell Telstra and in the process took on the obligation to subsidise services to areas like this, where it would never be a commercial reality to provide services.

In order for the Emergency Warning Systems to effectively warn residents of this district and tourists visiting this area, mobile phone services need to be provided, and we request that the Senator investigate funding options to address this.

Thank you for your attention to this matter.

Yours sincerely,

Traci Wilson- Brown  
Committee of Management  
Gelantipy District Bush Nursing Centre Inc.