



NFF briefing paper

SUBJECT:	Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport References Committee inquiry into the Shutdown of the 3G mobile network. National Farmers' Federation response to questions taken on notice on 5 February 2025.
DATE:	Tuesday 11 February 2025

Issues post the shutdown of the 3G mobile network

NFF members continue to report:

- **Service coverage and quality has changed and, in many cases, degraded** post the shutdown of the 3G network.
- **Strong concern about the safety implications of poor connectivity, and frustration regarding the consequences of poor connectivity on regional productivity.** The shutdown coincided with both harvest and fire danger season for many, compounding stress about peoples' ability to communicate. Poor connectivity is compromising farmers' ability to conduct requisite business activities.
- **A strong reluctance to report issues.** Systemic connectivity issues have degraded trust between providers and rural communities. Farmers simply don't think that calling their provider is worth their time.
- **Raising concerns with providers does not result in solutions:** When farmers raise concerns with their provider, they are often told they must purchase additional equipment in order to address the issue (e.g. Cel-Fi booster), or told they can cancel their service.
- **Significant cost implications.** Farmers have paid significantly to upgrade devices and equipment pre the shutdown. After the shutdown, many are having to invest in additional connectivity enabling infrastructure to secure a level of coverage equal to what they had when the 3G network was available.

AgForce QLD survey results

- As of 4 December 2024:
 - 72 responses (all Telstra), 31 reporting problems at a fixed location (i.e. home), 41 on the move.
 - 28 can no longer make a call (39%)
 - 67 are experiencing dropouts (93%). That's despite 56 or 78% having coverage/bars, and 36 (exactly 50% of respondents) using an extension device.
 - 70 of 72 (98%) have noticed decreased coverage in certain locations.

NSWFarmers member feedback results

- 130 members responded to a '3G member experience form' between Nov-Dec 2024. The form was used to capture qualitative details (positive/negative/neutral) about connectivity after the 3G shutdown. NSWFarmers note that they have primarily heard from those facing problems.
- Summary data from Nov-Dec 2024 includes:
 - Mobile phone service re whilst making phone calls: 90% - it has gotten worse; 7% remained the same; 1.5% it had improved; 1.5% unsure. Related to coverage and quality.

- Mobile phone service re internet/data use: 76% - it has gotten worse; 12% remained the same; 0% it had improved; 12% unsure. Related to coverage, speed and quality.
- Network reliant devices on farm: 40% - it has gotten worse; 10% remained the same; 0% it had improved; 12% unsure; NA 39%. Related primarily to coverage.

Regional Tech Hub (RTH)

- RTH received 1858 inbound calls for the December quarter, 894 of those were in November alone (after the 31 October shutdown). In 2024, RTH received an average of 551 phone calls per month.
- Across all platforms, in November RTH supported 1391 people through tickets, bookings, events etc. The 2024 monthly average for people supported was 893.
- RTH recorded approximately 150 calls on 3G specific concerns. Most common issues include a lack of signal/coverage, and issues with mobile signal boosters and software upgrades.

Case studies

<p>Brenden Taylor, Warra, QLD AgForce</p> <p><i>Lack of coverage</i></p>	<p>Brendan runs a grain operation on the western downs between Dalby and Chinchilla. They are located on very flat plains country. They always had consistent mobile phone reception from Dalby to Chinchilla. After the 3G shutdown they are unable to make phone calls on this route without it dropping out or not connecting at all. This has proven to be very frustrating and caused significant productivity losses during one of the largest chickpea harvests on record.</p>
<p>NSWFarmers</p> <p><i>Financial cost of the shutdown</i></p>	<p>The shutdown of the 3G network has cost us in excess of \$15,000 in upgrading the modem in telemetry devices and tractors. Not to mention the stress caused when communication is unreliable."</p> <p>"Thousands of dollars have been spent setting up boosters in vehicles and at shearing huts, which now [post the 3G shutdown] receive no service."</p>
<p>Karl Knuth, QLD AgForce</p> <p><i>Lack of coverage</i></p> <p><i>Safety and productivity</i></p>	<p>Knuth family run a cattle operation around 20km the way the crow flies out of Charters Towers. Prior to the 3G shutdown they used to have around 90% coverage for both calls and data and had this coverage in place for at least 5 years. Post 3G shutdown they can make calls on around 20% of the property and they are only able to load data when they return to the homestead at night. The family had installed boosters in anticipation of reduced connection (at great expense) and it has made no difference, despite being on the Telstra network map.</p> <p>The lack of connectivity and mobile reception has made it very difficult to call for help during calving season. They used to be able to split up to go and check herds and call if someone needed help. Now, they need to travel out together, reducing their efficiencies. Key infrastructure (shed, stockyards, water troughs) was also built around where they used to have mobile reception. Most of this infrastructure now has no mobile connection.</p>
<p>Wendy Hick, QLD NFF Telecommunications Committee member, AgForce</p>	<p>Wendy was prepared for the shutdown, give her property received largely fortuitous coverage, she was set up with 4G compatible antennas. Post the shutdown, antennas are no longer picking up any signal, or if they do there is still no correlating ability to make a phone call. She is investing in additional boosters, struggling with</p>

	the availability of technicians to get out to the property to address issues, and navigating software upgrades.
NSWFarmers <i>Fortuitous coverage</i>	A NSW farmer cited that "They [the providers] did not make it clear that [guaranteed service area] actually only included the area they chose on a map and not the actual area where 3G was available on the ground."
NSWFarmers <i>Booster requirements and poor coverage and quality</i>	"We have had 98% service on our property Noonamah for at least the last 15 years with a car kit and no additional boosters required. Unfortunately, since turning off 3G this has deteriorated, and we are unable to get any service where it was once before. This means we are unavailable to receive calls, send texts, access the internet and all other mobile usages. This service issue affects our whole property including at our house where service is vital for our day-to-day operations and farm management. When we try to utilize the 4G network on a booster with a 30-meter tower there is constant dropouts, poor quality calls and decreased speeds. This is completely worrying for us due to the risk of medical episodes and the potential unavailability to contact emergency services if required."
Mixed cropping/livestock producer in Southern NSW, NSWFarmers <i>Cost of the shutdown</i>	<p>Estimates \$10 - 20k spent as a result of the 3G shutdown.</p> <p>Re Telstra and 3G shutdown</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "We purchased a cel fi booster (\$1300) didn't make any difference to phone reception. • Continually told we are in the coverage map yet consistently have dropouts, have had my phone tracked by Telstra to find issues, still no feedback from Telstra." <p>Farm equipment</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • New Holland header \$4k to upgrade telemetry to be compatible with 4G. • John Deere tractors that were linked to John Deere operations centre now need new 4G modems at a cost of \$2k plus per tractor. Frustrated John Deere didn't in advance of the shutdown. • Farm security cameras upgrades of up to \$1500 each • Farm digital weather stations also required upgrade - \$2.5k each

Recommendations

Address 3G shutdown issues:

- The NFF strongly supports further investigation and appropriate intervention to ensure that providers deliver equivalent mobile coverage and quality to rural Australians.
- Providers should make a proactive effort, beyond business-as-usual customer support, to reach out to customers, particularly those in rural areas, to understand and address individual issues.

NFF policy priorities:

- **Ongoing investment programs in connectivity infrastructure:** The NFF supports ongoing public funding of investment programs to ensure the delivery of connectivity service expansion and quality improvements e.g. mobile blackspot program, regional roads Australian mobile program.
- **Equitable and efficient spectrum allocation:** The NFF supports the equitable and efficient distribution of spectrum to foster a competitive environment that fosters investment in network expansion and improvement.

- **Addressing non-infrastructure related challenges:** Non infrastructure related connectivity challenges, such as congestion, backhaul capacity and spectrum allocation, must be overcome to ensure positive connectivity outcomes.
- **National Audit of Mobile Coverage:** This transition has demonstrated the need for independent coverage data. We strongly recommend the national audit of mobile coverage is expedited and extended to include agricultural properties, to validate people's lived experience of mobile coverage and quality. This is essential to ensuring greater consumer trust and transparency.

Relevant Regional Telecommunications Review 2024 recommendations:

- **Transition oversight:** The Committee recommends comprehensive independent monitoring and public reporting during large-scale telecommunications transitions, such as mobile technology switch offs and the migrations required for modernising the USO. The Australian Communications and Media Authority could be well-placed to perform this role.
- **Improving the mobile experience:** The Australian Government should:
 - prioritise funding to improve existing terrestrial mobile network capacity, service quality, and resilience, rather than further extending terrestrial coverage
 - continue funding new terrestrial mobile coverage for critical areas like roads, and leverage strategically located Wi-Fi hotspots where needed
 - request the ACCC to conduct a new inquiry into mandatory domestic mobile roaming, considering emerging DTH satellite technologies and its effect on competition
 - mandate, at the earliest opportunity, emergency mobile roaming during disasters and expedite the regulatory and operational framework for its use
 - increase consumer and business awareness of terrestrial mobile network alternatives like Wi-Fi calling and Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) services for fixed locations
 - enhance the ACMA's resources to enforce compliance against the sale and use of illegal mobile phone boosters and other unauthorised equipment and installation practices.
- **USO reform:** Expedite universal service reforms that modernise the Universal Service Obligation.
- **Regional Telecommunications Strategy:** The Committee recommends that the Australian Government develop a regional, rural and remote connectivity strategy. The strategy should be a vision for regional telecommunications and guide future investment and the regulatory environment for the future.

Lessons for future telecommunications transitions

This isn't the first large-scale telecommunications transition for Australia, and it won't be the last. Rural Australians need confidence that telecommunications providers and the Australian Government can protect their interests through periods of significant change. To this end, the NFF is supportive of the 2024 Regional Telecommunications Review recommendation for comprehensive independent monitoring and public reporting during large-scale telecommunications transitions.

- **Telecommunications transitions must lead to equivalent or improved outcomes.** Transparent testing of coverage and additional quality assurance efforts would have bolstered consumer confidence and, potentially, supported improved outcomes from the 3G shutdown.
- **Communication with customers:** Targeted, consistent and appropriate communication with rural customers. Providers should have made a more significant effort to ensure that consumers understood likely changes to service coverage and quality (e.g. it is now clear that fortuitous coverage was not well understood before the shutdown). Post-transition communication should be approached similarly to enable issues to be reported and addressed quickly and effectively. Consumer trust is built through communication.

- **Onus placed on communities, industry groups and customers:** While everyone has a role to play in supporting this type of major transition, a disproportionate onus was placed on industry and community groups to communicate with consumers on behalf of providers. Post the shutdown, providers have left consumers to discover any issues with little-to-no proactive communication as to available support.
- **Government should require providers to work together on communication of transition requirements and impacts.** The pre-shutdown safety campaign, conducted by the major providers at the direction of the Australian Government, was broadly welcomed and effective. Communication on critical elements of a major transition should be clear, concise and from a single source of truth where possible.