

1049-1539



SENATOR THE HON MITCH FIFIELD

MINISTER FOR COMMUNICATIONS
MINISTER FOR THE ARTS

MINISTER ASSISTING THE PRIME MINISTER FOR DIGITAL GOVERNMENT
MANAGER OF GOVERNMENT BUSINESS IN THE SENATE

Dr Dennis Jensen MP
Chair
Standing Committee on Petitions
PO Box 6021
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

04 DEC 2015

Petition 1049/1539 – Mobile coverage at Sulphur Creek

Dear Dr ~~Jensen~~

Thank you for your letter to the Hon Malcolm Turnbull MP, the former Minister for Communications, concerning a petition submitted to the Standing Committee on Petitions, regarding mobile coverage at Sulphur Creek and surrounding communities in Tasmania.

I understand the concerns of the residents of Sulphur Creek, Heybridge and Preservation Bay regarding mobile phone coverage. While mobile carriers claim to provide coverage to 99 per cent of Australia's population, there are still large areas that have no coverage, particularly in regional and remote locations. Expanding mobile coverage has clear economic and social benefits, as well as public safety benefits for people living, working and travelling in regional and remote areas of Australia.

Mobile Black Spot Programme - Round 1 outcomes

The Australian Government committed \$100 million through Round 1 of the Mobile Black Spot Programme to invest in telecommunications infrastructure to address mobile black spots along major regional transport routes, in small communities and in locations prone to experiencing natural disasters.

On 25 June 2015, the Government announced that under Round 1 of the Programme, 499 new or upgraded mobile base stations will be deployed across regional and remote Australia – 429 Telstra base stations and 70 Vodafone base stations. The number of base stations funded nationally is well in excess of expectations.

Nationally, the funded base stations will provide new and upgraded handheld coverage to 68 600 square kilometres and new external antenna coverage to over 150 000 square kilometres of regional and remote Australia. In addition, over 5 700 kilometres of major regional transport routes will receive new handheld or external antenna coverage.

The Programme has been highly successful in maximising co-contributions from third parties, including state and local governments and local communities. The collective total being invested in the 499 base stations under Round 1 of the Programme is \$385 million.

How the funded base stations were selected

The Government undertook an extensive public consultation process to inform the development of the Programme. As part of this consultation process, members of the public were asked to nominate locations across regional Australia where they believed mobile coverage was either poor or non-existent. Over 6 000 locations reported by the public were added to the Government's database of reported locations.

In addition, the Government consulted extensively with Telstra, Optus, Vodafone and other industry participants in relation to the design and delivery of the Programme. In December 2014, the Programme Guidelines were released and the competitive selection process commenced, with funding proposals due from mobile network operators and infrastructure providers in April 2015.

The operators were asked to come forward with proposals to build new or upgraded mobile base stations to deliver improved mobile coverage to one or more of the locations on the database which had been reported by members of the public. Applications for funding were received from Optus, Telstra and Vodafone.

All proposed base stations included in the applications submitted by the operators were assessed and ranked according to the assessment criteria outlined in the Programme Guidelines. The assessment criteria included the expected benefits that each base station would deliver, such as the amount of square kilometres, the number of premises, and the length of major transport routes to receive new mobile coverage.

Consideration was also given to the total cost of the base station, the amount of Commonwealth funding being sought, the amount of funding the operator was proposing to co-contribute, and the amount of co-contribution, if any, it had secured from a third party such as a state or local government.

The communities of Sulphur Creek, Heybridge and Preservation Bay are expected to receive some benefit from Round 1 of the Programme. The base stations to be located at Gawler and South Riana are expected to provide some improved mobile coverage to these communities, however given the distance from the base stations, it is likely to be external antenna coverage.

Round 2

Naturally, the primary concern of the residents of Sulphur Creek, Heybridge and Preservation Bay will be whether there is an opportunity for them to receive further improved mobile coverage in the future.

The Government has announced that it will commit \$60 million for Round 2 of the Programme, with funding to be available over a two year period from July 2016. Round 2 is expected to operate under similar guidelines as the first round, although the Government is reviewing the results of Round 1 to determine if there should be any changes for Round 2.

The Government will again seek to leverage additional funding from the mobile network operators and other levels of government, with a view to maximising the number of new or upgraded base stations which can be delivered.

Round 2 will continue to utilise the database of mobile black spot locations nominated by members of the public. The Government has re-opened the database to allow members of the public to nominate further regional locations which have poor or no mobile coverage.

I am advised that Sulphur Creek has previously been reported as a regional mobile black spot location and has been added to the database to be used for Round 2. I have requested that Heybridge and Preservation Bay also be added to the database. Further nominations can be emailed to mobilecoverage@communications.gov.au.

The competitive selection process for Round 2 is expected to commence in 2016, after allowing time for further locations to be reported and a review of the operation of Round 1. The locations to be funded under Round 2 are expected to be announced by the end of 2016.

I encourage the residents of Sulphur Creek, Heybridge and Preservation Bay to highlight to the mobile network operators their interest in obtaining improved mobile coverage in their area.

Further information about the Mobile Black Spot Programme is available on the Department's website at www.communications.gov.au/mobile_coverage

Thank you for bringing the concerns of the Sulphur Creek, Heybridge and Preservation Bay communities to my attention. I trust this information will be of assistance.



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3/12/15