

Senate Standing Committee on Environment and Communications

Answers to Senate Estimates Questions on Notice

Additional Estimates Hearings February 2015

Communications Portfolio

Department of Communications

Question No:4

Program No. 1.1

Hansard Ref: Page 6 -7, 24/02/2015

Topic: USO – Gulf Region of Queensland

Senator CANAVAN asked:

Senator CANAVAN: The issue I want to raise is in the gulf region of Queensland around Normanton. I have heard of numerous properties that have been without a standard telephone service for months at a time. I have personally raised this with Telstra and they have blamed equipment suppliers and manufacturers and delays in getting particular equipment, which is somewhat out of date, apparently, and hard to source. I want to ask the policy related question. My reading of their universal service obligation basically gives them an out if they have a supplier issue. Is that correct?

Mr Clarke: It is probably a question best put to TUSMA, who administer the contract. It will be a matter defined under the TUSMA contracts.

Senator CANAVAN: It is a policy issue as well, presumably. We set the policy, presumably.

Mr Clarke: If the contracts are not delivering a satisfactory service on balance, then it would become a policy issue, yes.

Senator CANAVAN: If it is an out clause, then obviously TUSMA would say that they are meeting their current obligations under the policy framework that the government has set. You are not aware of what the policy settings are in that regard right now?

Ms O'Loughlin: I do not have the detail with me, but it is fair to say that there are various provisions around the USO to add a reasonableness requirement within the delivery—so for things like if there are massive disruptions due to the weather in the area. That might be one. We would be happy to take it on notice or talk to TUSMA about it.

Senator CANAVAN: Can you take that on notice...

Ms O'Loughlin: ...But we would be happy to take the detail of that on notice and explore it with Telstra and get back to you as to why people have been without phones for significant lengths of time. Obviously that is something we would be very concerned about.

Senator CANAVAN: Just to clarify, these are cattle stations largely. So they would be reliant on radio for part of the service. They are not on a network. But they do not have any other real communications—no mobile phones or anything like that, of course. So they do require it.

Answer:

The Universal Service Obligation (USO) provides that standard telephones and payphones are reasonably accessible to all people in Australia on an equitable basis wherever they reside or carry on business.

TUSMA administers a contract with Telstra to provide standard telephone services in accordance with the USO. TUSMA assesses Telstra's performance in delivering a standard telephone service against its performance in meeting Customer Service Guarantee (CSG) Benchmarks.

Senate Standing Committee on Environment and Communications

Answers to Senate Estimates Questions on Notice

Additional Estimates Hearings February 2015

Communications Portfolio

Department of Communications

CSG standards set out timeframes in relation to service connection, fault repair and appointment keeping.

The TUSMA contract does not specify circumstances in which the provider is not required to provide services. However the *Telecommunications (Customer Service Guarantee) Standard 2011* provides a number of factors that may exempt the provider from the service standards, including 'circumstances beyond the control of the carriage service provider.'

Telstra's performance in providing the USO is assessed against CSG Benchmarks. In 2013 -14 Telstra exceeded all nine required CSG Benchmarks.

TUSMA staff sought information from Telstra regarding the specific circumstances referred to by Senator Canavan and were not able to confirm the exact property referred to but suspect it is a station in Wilverton in Northern Queensland. Telstra advise that there were three service outages within a short period of time. The station is connected to the Controller Area Network which is reliant on batteries which are solar powered and we understand that there was a problem with the solar power invertors that led to the batteries not charging correctly resulting in service failures. There was an issues with availability of replacement solar inverters.

We have been advised that that the problems have been rectified.