



16 December 2024

Committee Secretary
Senate Standing Committees on Environment and Communications
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Canberra ACT 2600

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RE: NFF submission to the Environment and Communications Legislation Committee on the National Broadband Network Companies Amendment (Commitment to Public Ownership) Bill 2024 [Provisions].

The National Farmers' Federation (NFF) welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission in support of the National Broadband Network Companies Amendment (Commitment to Public Ownership) Bill 2024 (the Bill) to the Environment and Communications Legislation Committee (the Committee).

Regional, rural and remote Australians place the utmost importance on accessible, reliable, affordable and quality connectivity services. Such services are fundamental to economic, social, health and educational outcomes, the importance of which is often heightened for those living outside of metropolitan areas.

Recent years have seen an acceleration in the importance of connectivity services and changes to the connectivity landscape. The 2021 Regional Telecommunications Review identified a "step change in the demand for telecommunications" with a new paradigm in the essential nature of connectivity to everyday lives as well as being essential to underpinning the opportunities that exist in the ever-digitising economy now more than ever.¹

While significant advances have been made in recent years, many regional Australians continue to face connectivity challenges. Service quality, reliability and accessibility issues remain, presenting ongoing primary connectivity barriers for regional Australians, farm businesses and workers. The agricultural sector is

¹ Regional Telecommunications Review, 2021, 2021 Regional Telecommunications Review - A step change in demand, Pg 1.

acutely aware that continued advancements in connectivity are essential to support Australian agriculture's 2030 \$100 billion farm-gate revenue aspiration. Connectivity is intrinsically tied to Australian farmers' competitiveness, efficiency, productivity and sustainability.

While the regional telecommunications market has undergone significant changes in recent years, there remains a cohort of Australians for whom the market would otherwise not provide baseline services to, in the absence of regulatory intervention.

NBN Co ensures the availability of reliable and affordable broadband to all Australians, irrespective of their postcode, pursuant their responsibilities under the Universal Service Guarantee. NBN Co is the default wholesale provider of broadband services nationally and provides broadband infrastructure to premises across Australia using fixed line (92% of its network), fixed wireless (5% of its network) and satellite technologies (3% of its network). The NFF is supportive of maintaining public ownership of NBN Co for the foreseeable future and, as such, supports ensuring that strong safeguards exist to privatisation.

In the current telecommunications market, the public ownership of NBN Co will best ensure the responsible delivery of broadband to regional, rural and remote Australians. While technology advancements and increased competition may change broadband delivery in the future, such progress is unlikely to deliver adequate and equitable broadband to all regional, rural and remote consumers in the short-to-medium term.

Further, the public ownership of NBN Co ensures a comparatively higher degree of accountability, transparency and regulatory oversight, warranted to ensure the responsible delivery of an essential service. NBN Co should continue to be held accountable to universal service objectives and be responsive to consumer needs, including in regard to pricing and service quality. Maintaining public ownership of NBN Co reinforces public confidence in its capacity to deliver an essential service responsibly and equitably.

Further, the current model allows NBN Co to invest with certainty in the technologies and infrastructure required to meet Australia's evolving connectivity needs. For regional, rural and remote communities, this includes upgrades to fixed wireless and satellite networks, and sustained investment in enhanced network resilience. In an increasingly unpredictable and volatile climate, the importance of sustained investment in network capacity and resilience cannot be overstated.

The risks and implications associated with the privatisation of NBN CO are serious. A commercially driven approach to broadband delivery in rural and remote areas will risk reduced coverage, increased costs and diminished accountability.

It is for these reasons that the NFF supports ensuring that any attempt to privatise NBN Co must overcome appropriate legislative hurdles. We welcome legislative recognition of the Australian Government's policy that NBN Co should remain in public ownership.

Importantly, the NFF does not condone this important public policy being used as a political football. Safeguarding the public ownership of NBN Co for all Australians should attract support from all political parties.

The NFF thanks the Committee for the opportunity to make a submission to this inquiry. The policy contact for this matter is Miss Charlotte Wundersitz, General Manager (Rural Affairs), via e-mail: cwundersitz@nff.org.au.

Yours sincerely,

TONY MAHAR
Chief Executive Officer