



## **National Farmers' Federation**

**Submission to the  
Department of Communications and the Arts  
Consumer Safeguards Review – Part A – Redress and Complaints  
Handling**

3 August 2018

# NFF Member Organisations





The National Farmers' Federation (NFF) is the voice of Australian farmers.

The NFF was established in 1979 as the national peak body representing farmers and more broadly, agriculture across Australia. The NFF's membership comprises all of Australia's major agricultural commodities across the breadth and the length of the supply chain.

Operating under a federated structure, individual farmers join their respective state farm organisation and/or national commodity council. These organisations form the NFF.

The NFF represents Australian agriculture on national and foreign policy issues including workplace relations, trade and natural resource management. Our members complement this work through the delivery of direct 'grass roots' member services as well as state-based policy and commodity-specific interests.

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## Executive Summary

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The National Farmers' Federation (NFF) welcomes the opportunity to make a submission in response to the Consumer Safeguards Review – Part A – Redress and Complaints Handling.

As part of the Universal Service Guarantee Reform process, the Consumer Safeguard Review is of paramount importance to the agricultural industry as a way to improve telecommunications services in regional, rural and remote Australia to facilitate economic growth across agriculture through innovation in production, improved market access and enhanced consumer connectivity. At present a lack of access to reliable, affordable and efficient telecommunications is hampering the adoption of innovative technologies that are so crucial to enabling agriculture and rural communities to grow.

To achieve NFF's vision of a \$100 billion dollar industry, the sector deserves well-developed initiatives and reforms that will assist public policy settings in fostering growth and productivity, establishing a new market of opportunity and championing innovation and ambition. This includes adequate connectivity in order to capture the next generation of farming technology.

Access to reliable, affordable, quality telecommunications underpins the viability of regional development and farming businesses across Australia. Allowing farming and regional families access to the digital economy through business development, education services and social connectivity is required if a region is to grow, improve and sustain.

Regional communities continue to face difficulties in accessing affordable quality telecommunications. Reliable broadband and telephone services are not only essential for survival in the Australian bush, they are also crucial to the creation of new opportunities in agriculture. State-of-the-art tools such as Big Data and fast internet greatly increase on-farm productivity by enabling farmers to digitally analyse soil moisture, meteorological records and satellite imagery. Critical for this development will be the provision of agricultural data in an openly accessible location. Additionally, it is vital to maintain the copper networks for fixed line telephones in rural areas. Foggy and overcast conditions make wireless connectivity impossible and fixed line telephones will provide a reliable communications option.

The rollout of the National Broadband Network (NBN) and the Mobile Blackspot Programme have significantly improved telecommunications in rural and regional Australia. However, the 2015 Regional Telecommunications Review established that there are currently still communication infrastructure shortfalls in regional Australia, relating to limited coverage, poor data speeds and limited competition between different telecommunication carriers.

In regards to rural, regional and remote customers rectifying issues with their telecommunication services, those tasked with resolving the issue are often not cognisant of the unique nature and challenges of utilising telecommunication services in rural and remote Australia nor do they have the technical or product expertise to resolve the issue due to the unique technology mix often utilised to attain a service. Rural users pay significantly higher fees for the same telecommunication services than urban customers. It is therefore crucial that telecommunication consumer safeguards are effective in addressing the issues faced by those living and working in regional, rural and remote Australia.

## Responses to questions raised in the discussion paper

Proposal 1 - Telecommunications Providers must have and maintain complaint handling policies which detail their processes and procedures for handling customer complaints in compliance with the governing rules.

The NFF agrees with the principles underlying this proposal and endorses the view that industry should have responsibility for taking care of its customers, and that consumer safeguards are best delivered through direct regulation.

The physical existence of a telecommunication service (landline, mobile or internet) is no guarantee that a service will meet the needs of a business or individual. Anecdotally, outages in both landline and satellite services, and metro centric customer service staff are a constant frustration for agricultural users – a challenging scenario for running a business.

Ideally telecommunication service providers (TSP) should be responsible for delivering the service that they are providing and be accountable to the customer in regards to complaints. The introduction of the *Telecommunications (Consumer Complaints Handling) Industry standard 2018* (Complaints-Handling Standard) that require TSP's to comply with rules specifying how complaints are managed, including time frames for response and resolution; and the Record Keeping Rules, and require TSP's to report overall complaints data to the ACMA on a quarterly basis, will go some way toward encouraging TSP's to resolve complaints without the need for recourse to external escalation.

There is also the potential for the ACMA to develop a rating system for TSP's to enable customers to have a clearer picture of those TSP's that endeavour to resolve issues in an efficient manner without the need for external escalation.

It is important for customers to have some indication of how issues will be dealt with including the time frames associated with rectifying those issues when choosing their TSP. It is appropriate for TSP's to make redress and complain handling processes and policies readily available through their websites or via printed material if requested. This information could potentially be housed on the ACMA website also.

The NFF recognises that the government has committed to more modern infrastructure framework (the nbn), this does not negate the fact that geographically a majority of users in rural and remote Australia will be serviced via satellite – including areas that are connected by landline for voice services over the existing copper network. Telecommunications in regional and rural Australia can present unique challenges including disruptions of services. Often those tasked with resolving the issue are not cognisant of the unique nature and challenges of utilising telecommunication services in rural and remote Australia nor do they have the technical or product expertise to resolve the issue.

It is critical that TSP's upskill their staff to have a better understanding of the often unique products that are utilised in rural and remote Australia as well as the challenges that telecommunications in rural and remote Australia presents. The Australian Communications Consumer Action Network (ACCAN) recent report *Can you hear me?*<sup>1</sup> Highlights that customers spend an average of 21 days trying to resolve their query, and three in ten customers

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<sup>1</sup> *Can you hear me? Ranking the customer service of Australia's phone and internet companies research report.* The Australian Communications Consumer Action Network (ACCAN), 23 July 2018

who had an issue escalated their issue in one form or other (either through the provider or the TIO).

Anecdotally, the NFF membership has reported that in relation to resolving issues, aside from language barriers in service providers international call centres, the fundamental issue is lack of understanding of the unique nature of living in rural, remote and regional Australia. If a customer lives in a mobile black spot, and loses access to their landline, they must travel some distance from their landline to trouble shoot the problem. Metro-centric methods of trouble shooting are often frustrating and not useful for those who live in regional, rural and remote Australia.

Proposal 2 - An External Dispute Resolution body, independent of industry, should be established to deal with complex complaints that are unable to be resolved directly between customers and their providers. Consideration will need to be given to the appropriate governance arrangements to support the body, with its independence being a guiding principle.

The NFF agrees with Proposal 2, and endorses the principles behind this proposal. The NFF supports an independent body that is sufficiently empowered to resolve disputes where the issue cannot be resolved between TSP's and consumers. The NFF concurs that there should be public visibility and accountability for performance in resolving complaints including fairness and transparency in the External Dispute Resolution body's setting of its priorities, decision making and governance arrangements.

The NFF recognises that currently the Telecommunications Industry Ombudsman (TIO) provides an independent dispute settlement service for unresolved complaints, and is industry owned and funded. The NFF believe that independent reporting for external dispute resolution is important to achieve improvement accountability and transparency in complaint redress.

The current governance of the TIO is not of a concern for the NFF, as we believe that the board of the TIO has sufficient independence from industry, and current legislative arrangements regarding Ministerial oversight and intervention provide additional risk mitigation. The NFF would therefore endorse the current TIO system be strengthened and adequately resourced to enable it to act as an effective independent External Dispute Resolution (EDR) body.

One of the ways that the TIO system could be strengthened to include a mandate whereby it works closely with the ACMA and is tasked with identifying systemic complaints and analysing root causes or recurring issues across the entire supply chain. The NFF would also suggest that consideration be given to increase the scope of the TIO to include wholesalers who have direct contact with consumers. This will result in the TIO being proactively engaged in driving industry improvements. The TIO should also be empowered to compel TSP's to act to address complaints, including the provision of compensation if necessary and warranted.

The NFF believe that there should be strong penalties for TSP's that don't follow their own complaint handling procedures. The NFF would support a charging structure for complaints lodged with the EDR body be structured to encourage providers to exhaust all practical steps to directly resolve the complaint with the consumer before referring to the EDR body.

Proposal 3 - Responsibility for collection of data relating to industry performance and complaints should be transferred to the ACMA. The ACMA will publish reports detailing analysis of this data, as well as including complaints data in its annual communications report.

The NFF supports Proposal 3, and agree that improved complaints data collection, analysis and reporting should drive improved outcomes for customers. The NFF believe that it is appropriate for the EDR body to regularly (at least quarterly) report to the ACMA on complaint data for analysis.

One other critical factor that must be considered is aligning existing processes that are in place for telecommunication reform. Some of the processes that will have a practical influence on the final telecommunications consumer safeguard framework include:

- ) Implementation of the Regional Broadband Scheme
- ) Joint Parliamentary Committee Inquiry into the National Broadband Network
- ) Regional Telecommunications Review
- ) USO review

While these processes are beyond the department's control, strategic alignment is an important policy consideration, particularly for the practical implication of policy recommendations. The above mentioned inquiries investigate key issues that shape the telecommunications market for farmers and must form part of the discussion for a true, holistic examination of the market place. Indeed, the NFF is concerned that continuing to consider key issues through a range of inquiries and forums will not only lead to a patchwork approach to policy consideration, but will also result in a patchwork of outcomes that will continue to perpetuate the rural/urban divide in telecommunications.

The NFF is happy to expand on any of the issues raised in this submission, if further information is required please contact Mark Harvey-Sutton (General Manager, Rural Affairs) on 02 6292 0579.