

The Federal Government in December 2013 announced a two stage national Mobile Communications Programme that will provide support funding for new mobile base towers for areas with poor or no mobile wireless voice or broadband data service. The Mt Wilson Progress Association joined with the Mt Irvine Progress Association and our RFS brigade to put in an initial submission to the Federal Department of Communications in support of investment in our area on 24 February 2014.

**Mt Wilson / Mt Irvine Rural Fire Brigade
Mt Wilson Progress Association
Mt Irvine Progress Association**

**Submission to the Department of Communications
Mobile Coverage Programme**

THE DESIGN OF THE PROGRAMME*

*See the Programme Discussion Paper at [*http://www.communications.gov.au/mobile_services/mobile_coverage_programme](http://www.communications.gov.au/mobile_services/mobile_coverage_programme)

This submission is made on behalf of the Mount Wilson and Mount Irvine communities in the Blue Mountains, NSW. They are isolated communities located to the north of Katoomba and are on the northern side of the Grose Valley.

This is a joint submission by the Mt Wilson / Mt Irvine Rural Fire Brigade, the Mt Wilson Progress Association and the Mt Irvine Progress Association.

The Mt Wilson and Mt Irvine communities are small villages surrounded by the Blue Mountains and Wollemi National Parks. The villages are across the Bowens Creek valley from Bilpin and Mt Tomah. This means they are across the valley from Bells Line of Road which is the second crossing of the Blue Mountains after the Great Western Highway. The Bells Line of Road carries considerable traffic volumes.

The practical reality is that mobile coverage is, with few exceptions, non-existent. The communities wish to be included for consideration for investment in telecommunications infrastructure to achieve high quality terrestrial mobile voice and wireless broadband services.

Our submission focuses on the design of the Mobile Coverage Programme.

The key Programme assessment criteria we believe should have the highest ranking and weight assigned for new investment in mobile coverage are to areas prone to experiencing emergencies – natural disasters, accidents, and incidents of serious medical events.

We look forward to making a further submission when called for by the Department on the substantive communication and technical issues for our communities resulting from there being poor or no mobile coverage in the area.

Mobile voice and wireless broadband service investment ranking priorities

The Programme Discussion Paper assessment criteria include the following with the highlighted areas being particularly relevant to Mt Wilson and Mt Irvine.

1. **Match with the priority programme locations** – each proposed base station (or single base station within a group) will be assessed according to whether it is located within one of the priority locations:
 - a. **\$80 million Mobile Network Expansion Project:** For a base station included within a bid for this component, whether it improves mobile coverage along major transport routes, **in small communities and in areas that are prone to experiencing natural disasters.**

- b. **\$20 million Mobile Black Spots Project:** For a base station included within a bid for this component, **whether it provides coverage to improve mobile coverage in locations with unique coverage problems, such as areas with high demand for services during seasonal holiday periods.**

The Mt Wilson and Mt Irvine communities believe health, safety and the protection of life and property should always be the first consideration for any action and have the highest weighting in the development of a seriatim for any ranking, including ranking community benefit infrastructure investment such as for mobile towers.

For example, in ranking reliable mobile communications investment the priority between “areas prone to experiencing natural disasters” and “along major transport routes” the former could have at least twice the weighting of the latter. The grounds for this are that an isolated community in the middle of a natural disaster could face avoidable catastrophic circumstances with reliable mobile communications while travellers on a major highway are not isolated as there will be mobile coverage further along their route.

Mt Wilson and Mt Irvine – an area “prone to experiencing natural disasters”

The communities of Mt Wilson and Mt Irvine are strongly focused on the issues of health, safety and the protection of life and property because of experience with hugely destructive natural disaster events. To illustrate the commitment of the communities to these issues our Rural Fire Brigade has 95 active operational and support members with a local per capita ratio of 38 per cent of local people involved for the approximately 230 people, 190 in Mt Wilson and 40 in Mt Irvine – about 65 per cent of whom are 61 years of age or older.

In the last three years alone the communities experienced a wind storm that knocked out telephone communications and we were without electricity for about five days in July 2011. In Mt Irvine homes and equipment were lost and Mt Wilson narrowly escaped the devastation of the October 2013 Blue Mountains bushfires. In 2012, a wind storm knocked down our RFS radio communications tower at Mt Wilson that carried police, ambulance, National Parks and RFS radio communications. Detailed information about these disaster events can be seen at these links:

The 2011 wind storm

http://www.mtwilson.com.au/images/stories/MWPA_Newsletters/August_2011.pdf

The 2013 bush fires

http://www.mtwilson.com.au/images/stories/MWPA_Newsletters/November_2013.pdf

Improved communications are critical for emergencies in or near Mt Wilson and Mt Irvine

Related to the Programme assessment criteria of being an area “prone to experiencing natural disasters”, Mt Wilson and Mt Irvine are substantially self-reliant in providing emergency medical, accident and fire response teams whenever there is an incident in or near the communities.

The Mt Wilson / Mt Irvine Rural Fire Brigade is called out to many types of emergency. The types of callouts include motor vehicle accidents, search and rescue in the gorges and National Parks adjacent to the villages, bush fires and house fires.

The brigade is also unique in NSW in providing a Community First Responder service for medical emergencies. These occur whenever an ambulance is called to one of the villages as it takes an ambulance 45 minutes or more to reach the area. Immediate medical assistance is provided by paramedic trained local volunteers – our Community First Responders. The lack of mobile phone coverage means we either rely on good luck, radio communications or have to release a volunteer to guide the ambulance to the site of the emergency within the villages. With reliable mobile phone coverage we could call the ambulance paramedics and guide them to the site of the incident.

In responding to motor vehicle accidents on the Bells Line of Road and the Mt Wilson and Mt Irvine roads the brigade provides fire cover, traffic control and first response medical assistance.

Lack of mobile phone coverage hampers these activities and limits our ability to handle some emergencies. The Mt Wilson /Mt Irvine Rural Fire Brigade callout data follows

Call Outs						YTD
	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	19 Feb 2014
Community First Responder	9	13	15	12	13	1
Search & Rescue	4	6	4	3	3	0
Motor Vehicle Accidents	3	16	16	16	15	8
Trees Down/ Storm Damage	2	3	9	4	6	0
Fires	2	3	4	4	23	2
Alarms	2	2	1	0	0	0
Oil Clean Up			2	1	2	0
Total	22	43	51	40	62	11

An area prone to experiencing emergencies – natural disasters, accidents, medical

Given the type of emergencies the Mt Wilson and Mt Irvine communities need to deal with, and given the nature of our isolation, we believe the criteria should be broadened beyond natural disasters to include the other types of emergencies we and similar communities experience.

Determination of Programme assessment criteria for base stations to improve mobile coverage along major transport routes

While we believe health, safety and the protection of life and property should always have the highest priority in the assessment criteria, the provision of reliable mobile coverage along major transport routes is clearly important. However, we suggest that where it could be possible, as we believe may be the case with Mt Wilson and Mt Irvine, that investment for service in areas that are prone to natural disasters would also support coverage of a major transport route then that area of the route should be weighted higher because of the dual benefit. In the case of Mt Wilson and Mt Irvine, the second – and only alternative route over the Blue Mountains – is the Bells Line of Road which is variously within five and ten kilometres of our two communities.

Determination of Programme assessment criteria for base stations to improve mobile coverage in locations with unique coverage problems, such as areas with high demand for services during seasonal holiday periods

We endorse inclusion of the criteria for investment in base stations such as in areas that experience seasonal and peak holiday demand for mobile coverage. Mt Wilson and Mt Irvine experience such seasonal demand.

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