

What is the USO?

The USO is the government policy which requires that 'reasonably accessible' phone services are available for all Australians. Telstra receives \$315 million per year to maintain USO phone services. This subsidy underpins the provision of ordinary copper phone line services in 'unprofitable' remote areas. That means Northcliffe.

The Government has asked the Productivity Commission to review the USO. The Productivity Commission's Draft USO Report has asked the question (to paraphrase):

Should NBN Sky Muster Satellite services be considered a replacement for standard telephone services?

If you want to skip the detail; suffice to say, we think the answer is NO. In big capital letters. Northcliffe CRC has made a submission to the Productivity Commission making the case for copper phone line services to continue in Northcliffe. If lobbying of the Productivity Commission fails the next step will be lobbying our politicians. For that reason we want to start educating Northcliffe residents about the issues.

Ok, I want the details. Hit me...

Vodafone, and other large companies are lobbying to end the USO. The argument put forward by these companies is that NBN services (National Broadband Network) like Sky Muster satellite, and mobile phones, mean there is no longer any need for a USO. There is a high chance that the end of the USO would mean our Telstra phone lines get switched off.

Wait, what, my phone line would stop working?!

That's right.

But I paid to have the copper lines installed!

Some have paid for hundreds of metres of trenching.

But how would I make phone calls?

Any internet connection, including a satellite connection, is capable of making and receiving a phone call. The technology is called VOIP (Voice Over Internet Protocol). If Northcliffe were to lose its phone service your options would be mobile phone, satellite phone or satellite VOIP.

What are the disadvantages of mobile phones?

1. Not all locations get a mobile phone signal.
2. We only have a Telstra tower in town, no Optus or Vodafone. This makes mobile phone access expensive.
3. In bad weather mobile phones struggle for a signal.
4. During blackouts mobile phones can run out of batteries.

What are advantages and disadvantages of satellite VOIP?

1. Phone calls made via satellite VOIP suffer from signal delays and echo. This is especially true if you are calling someone else who is also on a satellite VOIP phone.
2. NBN Sky Muster satellite services have been unreliable. Maintenance shut offs often occur for an hour or more,

starting at 11pm. Thunderstorms around Northcliffe, or thunderstorms around our satellite base station in Kalgoorlie, can cut off the connection. Any power outage, if you don't have large battery backups or a generator, mean your internet and phone stop working. It seems likely that in a bushfire VOIP phones would be the first to go...

3. Sky Muster satellite services suffer from widespread slow downs and regular short outages (1-2 minutes). While this will hopefully improve over time, we would not want to be relying on these services in an emergency.
4. Once the old phone network is switched off the copper will degrade to the point it can never be turned on again. Copper may even be reclaimed. We will be reliant on launches of new satellites every 15 years. Pricy and risky.

Any other bad news?

Removal of phone lines would mean ADSL and ADSL+ internet services in Northcliffe would cease to exist. ADSL is the preferred way of connecting to the internet if you need to download large amounts, if you have a family who have multiple internet connected devices, if you like to consume internet entertainment (iView, Netflix, iTunes), if you're a gamer, or if you're living in the near future where broadband will become more and more important. While not everyone in Northcliffe can receive ADSL, the availability of the service in town, especially publically at the NCRC, takes the stress off those who survive on mobile and satellite internet.

NCRC users access 600GB of download per month on our ADSL2+ connection. The maximum which would be available to the NCRC on the satellite or mobile internet is 50-60GB. NCRC services would be severely degraded.

A Really Bad Scenario

Imagine you live far out of Northcliffe, outside of mobile range. Your satellite internet stops working. That's your phone as well. So you have to drive into town to phone your satellite company to find out what to do. You spend an hour on hold on a mobile phone and then they offer to call you back. But you live out of mobile phone range so how will they get hold of you? You spend weeks troubleshooting a simple problem. You have no phone line in the mean time.

Will it really happen?

We sincerely hope not and the NCRC have argued as strongly as we can in our submission to the USO review that we need to keep our copper lines. It may be that the Productivity Commission decides the USO should be ended but it would be a brave government who carried out such a policy.

Even if we win this fight, we warn you Northcliffe, sooner or later they're a'comin for our copper!

We need a reprieve and during this reprieve we need to campaign for better alternatives.

Read our full submission to the USO Review here: northcliffe.org.au/resources/ncrc/NCRC-USO-Submission.pdf

Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday 10 am to 5 pm • Thursday 10 am to 6 pm • Friday 9 am to 6 pm



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