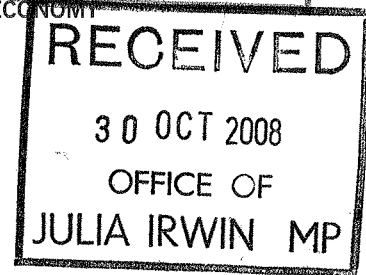
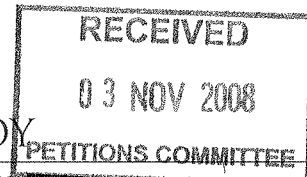




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MINISTER FOR BROADBAND, COMMUNICATIONS AND THE DIGITAL ECONOMY
DEPUTY LEADER OF THE GOVERNMENT IN THE SENATE



Mrs Julia Irwin MP
Chair of the Standing Committee on Petitions
Member for Fowler
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

22 OCT 2008

Dear Mrs Irwin

Mobile phone coverage

Thank you for your letter dated 4 September 2008 and for the opportunity to respond to the petition submitted to a recent meeting of the Standing Committee on Petitions by the Member for Barker, Mr Patrick Secker MP, concerning mobile phone coverage at Walker Flat. I apologise for the delay in replying.

The Australian Government appreciates the importance of mobile telephony to Australians. However, the decision to provide mobile phone coverage is primarily a commercial matter for mobile phone carriers. In making the decision to extend coverage to a particular area, a mobile phone carrier will consider a range of factors, including site availability, cost structures, likely levels of demand from users and overall economic viability of the service.

Telstra's online coverage maps indicate that mobile phone coverage is available throughout the Walker Flat district. However, an external antenna may be required to obtain a signal in some areas, including in the township itself. There appears to be no coverage provided in the area by other mobile phone providers (Optus, Vodafone and Hutchinson). Telstra's coverage maps are available online at www.telstra.com.au/mobile/networks/coverage/maps.cfm.

Telstra has advised that, within recent months, the transmission towers in the area have been revisited and some adjustment was done. Telstra also advised that they had received feedback indicating that coverage had improved.

There may be benefit in the residents of Walker Flat contacting their local Telstra Country Wide Area General Manager who may be able to advise whether there are particular reasons for a coverage problem, and steps residents might be able to take to improve reception. The Area General Manager for South Australia South is Mr Mark Bolton and he can be contacted on 1800 687 829, 08 8726 1112 or via email at southaustraliasouth@countrywide.telstra.com.

It should be noted that it is not possible to obtain terrestrial mobile phone reception in all areas of Australia. There are a number of factors that can interfere with mobile reception and therefore affect a user's ability to obtain or maintain a mobile phone signal at any given time or in any particular place. These factors include mountainous or hilly terrain, road cuttings, buildings, tunnels and electromagnetic energy from other sources.

The area along the Murray River around Walker Flat (including north to Punyeroo and south to Bowhill) presents some geographical challenges, in particular the cliffs and vegetation along the river and surrounding hills.

One effective way to increase coverage, particularly along country highways and in rural locations, is to use a properly installed car kit with an external antenna. The most appropriate antenna may vary between networks, and prices vary according to the quality.

An antenna's performance depends on where it is fitted on a vehicle. To assist with maximising network performance and coverage, the antenna should be installed on the car roof. The roof provides sufficient height and stops the car from blocking the signal. These accessories can be readily obtained from mobile phone shops and dealers.

In areas that are sparsely populated or have little passing traffic, the only commercially viable option for mobile phone services is via satellite. Satellite mobile phone services cover the entire Australian landmass and population and are available from a number of providers.

Residents of the Walker Flat district may be eligible for assistance under the Government's Satellite Phone Subsidy Scheme (the Scheme) if they are unable to access terrestrial mobile phone networks. The subsidy provides up to \$1000 for eligible applicants who live in areas without terrestrial mobile coverage, and up to \$700 for eligible applicants who live in areas that have coverage, but spend significant periods in non-coverage areas.

Information about the Scheme, and application forms, is available on the website of the Department of Broadband, Communications and the Digital Economy at www.dbcde.gov.au/satphone. An information kit can be obtained by contacting the Scheme administrator on freecall 1800 674 058 or via email satphone@dbcde.gov.au.

Thank you for bringing the Walker Flat petitioners' concerns to my attention.

Yours sincerely

Stephen Conroy
Minister for Broadband,
Communications and the Digital Economy