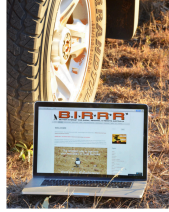




*Support, advisory & lobby group
for all bush telecommunications*



BIRRR MEDIA RELEASE

15th March 2026

Telstra retires crucial technology for bush

HCRC/ CAN Radio shutdown sparks safety fears in remote Australia

Better Internet for Rural, Regional and Remote Australia (BIRRR) has raised serious concerns following Telstra’s announcement it will retire its High Capacity Radio Concentrator (HCRC), also known as CAN Radio, landline network by 16 November 2027.

The consumer advocacy group warned the decision could remove a critical layer of communications redundancy for thousands of remote properties and communities, leaving many consumers reliant on a single satellite pathway for both voice and broadband.

Developed in the 1980s as a “revolutionary” network designed for Australia’s vast geography and dispersed population, HCRC / CAN Radio has provided reliable voice services to some of the nation’s most remote properties and communities for decades.

While acknowledging the network is aging and maintaining legacy infrastructure is becoming increasingly difficult, BIRRR co-founder Kristy Sparrow said the migration away from a proven terrestrial network to satellite-based alternatives introduces significant risks for remote consumers.

“CAN Radio was uniquely designed for Australia’s geography, harsh weather and dispersed population. For people living in remote areas without mobile coverage and mains power, it has been a trusted and reliable voice service for decades,” Ms Sparrow said.

BIRRR estimates the CAN Radio network currently supports communications for around 9,000 remote properties and communities, many of whom have no alternative voice services.

In these remote areas households rely on layered connectivity, a landline and a broadband service

“While LEO satellite services provide valuable connectivity for many remote users, they do come with limitations that need to be clearly understood,” she said.

“LEO services are foreign-owned and rely on power at the premises to operate. Both lived experience and available data show performance can be affected by weather conditions, power outages and equipment failure, particularly during periods of heavy rainfall.”

BIRRR members regularly report satellite services degrading or dropping out during heavy rain. During the recent above-average wet season across parts of Queensland and the Northern Territory, members reported their HCRC/CAN Radio landline remained the only functioning communication service when satellite systems failed.

Data from Federal Government voice trials analysed by BIRRR recorded significantly reduced voice call availability at Starlink test sites, particularly when rainfall exceeded 20mm per hour. By contrast, the trial dashboard identified nbn's terrestrial fixed wireless service did not fail during equivalent rainfall rates.

"It is risky to put all of your communications eggs in a satellite only basket," Ms Sparrow said.

"Satellite services absolutely have a role in improving connectivity across rural and remote Australia."

"But it is simply not accurate to suggest they perform like, or are as reliable as, terrestrial networks."

BIRRR also noted CAN Radio services form part of the Universal Service Obligation (USO), the long-standing policy intended to ensure all Australians have access to a reliable voice service.

While governments have promised reform of the USO framework for many years, no replacement framework has been implemented. Telstra currently receives around \$253 million per year to deliver universal landline services.

Ms Sparrow said the lack of government action has created uncertainty and allowed major technology migrations to proceed without a modern framework to properly manage consumer risks.

"USO reform has been talked about and consulted on for years, but nothing has been delivered," she said.

"In the meantime Telstra is migrating customers at scale without clear rules around reliability, resilience or how vulnerable consumers in remote Australia should be protected."

BIRRR said government and industry trials to date have not demonstrated that LEO satellite services can consistently provide the level of uptime required to replace a universal voice service.

"Time and again we've shared lived experience and real-world evidence from the bush," she said.

"But too often it is ignored and decisions appear to be based on dashboards and modelling from afar rather than what people are actually experiencing on the ground."

BIRRR also raised concerns about the shift from network-powered communications to systems that require electricity at the customer premises.

CAN Radio services are supported by Telstra supplied solar and battery systems, allowing calls to be made even during power outages. Replacement technologies require electricity at the premises.

"For many people living off-grid or in areas with frequent power outages, this could mean going outside in the middle of a storm to start a generator just to make an emergency call," Ms Sparrow said.

"In the worst cases an injured person living alone could be inside their home with no way to call for help."

“Moving from a passive network-powered system to one that relies on local power introduces new vulnerabilities as well as additional costs for households already managing the high cost of self-generating electricity in remote Australia.”

BIRRR also pointed to Telstra’s history of poorly managed technology transitions, including issues experienced during the 3G shutdown, raising concerns about how the planned migration will be managed.

“These transitions have not always gone smoothly for remote consumers,” Ms Sparrow said.

“Decisions about telecommunications in the bush must be informed by lived experience.”

“In a country where metropolitan areas benefit from 24/7 connectivity and multiple networks to fall back on, removing reliable services without equivalent replacements risks leaving people in the bush dangerously exposed when communications fail.”

BIRRR Member Quotes available for use:

Sean Dillon MP, Member for Gregory, Alpha QLD:

“I use HCRC on my property and during recent weather events it was the only communication that worked. I’ve even had to call the Premier on it because our satellite broadband services simply don’t work in heavy rain.

Telstra cannot keep taking hundreds of millions of dollars in funding under the Universal Service Obligation while stripping away one of the only terrestrial networks that actually works in the bush. Removing HCRC will leave many families across my electorate vulnerable and without redundancy, forced to rely on a foreign-owned satellite network that simply cannot guarantee the reliability remote Australians depend on and need.”

Jay & Bec, via Katherine, NT: *“We live off-grid on a remote property with three young kids and no mobile coverage, and HCRC is our most reliable voice service. Our Starlink regularly drops out in heavy rain and in recent months we’ve experienced packet loss of 30–80%, leaving us offline for hours at a time. We rely on the HCRC to run our business, contact medical and emergency services, stay socially connected and monitor flooded creeks and fires. For us and our staff it’s not old technology, it’s our safety net.*

We were recently flooded in for more than 10 days and needed to access medication from our emergency medical kit, which requires a telehealth appointment with a District Medical Officer. At the time heavy rain had knocked out our satellite service, and the HCRC landline was the only way we could communicate.

HCRC is also critical to our workplace health and safety plan because it has its own independent power supply. When a lightning strike damaged our homestead power system it was the only communication still working. With Bec often home alone with the kids while Jay works away and unable to troubleshoot faults with the off-grid power system, that redundancy is essential. Relying on a single satellite connection simply isn’t safe for remote families and businesses and falls well short of the workplace health and safety expectations placed on employers.

Chandra, Newman, W.A: *“We have no mobile coverage, so Starlink is our broadband and will now also be our voice service, which means no redundancy. When heavy rain hits our Starlink often drops out, and when our solar batteries recently failed the only communication we had was our CAN Radio landline. Without that we would have had no way to call for help. For people living remotely, a reliable backup isn’t optional, it’s critical.”*

Alana, Clermont, QLD: *“With no mobile coverage and only satellite internet on our cattle station in Central Queensland, we have relied on HCRC for more than two decades as our primary telecommunications service and it has rarely failed us. When the power fails, which is a regular occurrence, and during heavy rainfall, we have been able to rest in the knowledge our phone line will be available to connect with the outside world. I hold grave fears for those of us in this situation when Telstra migrates us to a satellite voice service, without back up power that our geographical isolation will be exacerbated.”*

Natalie, Rolleston, QLD: *“HCRC is the only reliable form of communication for many of us living outside major regional centres. Mobile coverage here is extremely limited, we have one bar in a small area near the house with an aerial and booster, and everywhere else there’s nothing. Since the switch from 3G to 4G mobile service has declined, and calls often drop out multiple times.*

Every time we have a power outage the HCRC landline is the only way we can contact the outside world. I keep an old phone plugged in just for that reason. During storms our Starlink often stops working as well, so it’s hard to understand how satellite services are meant to replace a system that actually works when we need it.”

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**Consumer contact details available
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Photo: HCRC Tower Quilpie, QLD
Wendy Sheehan Bulldust_and_Mulga



