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Wi-Fi survey reveals inadequate services for farmers

Farmers are concerned about the declining internet data accessibility. A recent survey has seen farmers express their frustrations that data connection services are slow and expensive and they feel they are being disadvantaged in the running of their businesses.

That's the findings of a recent survey that was conducted by the South East Premium Wheat Growers Association (SEPWA) to capture the direct experiences of Esperance Port Zone farmers and to better understand the current internet situation and how it affects local farming businesses.

Over the past year and with funding support from the Council of Grain Growers Organisation (COGGO), SEPWA has been investigating farm scale Wi-Fi and the future of data connection for WA grain growers.

The project has also seen the testing of other wireless data options in the region as alternative data connection for businesses in rural WA.

SEPWA Projects Officer, Nigel Metz said mobile devices are now an integral part of farming and farmers use them for live tracking of machinery, to access Apps and other valuable information which is pertinent to the running of farming businesses.

He said unfortunately the mobile phone network which services WA grain growers is patchy in coverage and struggles to cope with the ever expanding data demands.

"It has created a major bottle neck for technology adoption going forward and is holding farmers back from maximising its potential.

As more and more farmers adopt this technology and further technological advances come to the fore, there is a necessity to investigate new methods for them to have a data connection," Nigel said.

More than 50 growers participated in the survey that will help produce a submission to the State Government in support of improved data accessibility in regional Western Australia.

The survey revealed that around 60% of respondents in the region now use Telstra mobile broad band through the mobile phone network as the main internet connection method on farm.

Nigel said while this method has been rapidly adopted by rural people, there is an overall low level of satisfaction and especially when compared to 'in town' connection speeds versus 'on farm' via their mobile devices.

"However, the mobile network is very prone to congestion, particularly as more and more people and machines connect to this network.

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“In some cases farmers have up to 16 devices each individually connecting to the network, ranging from mobile phones, tablets, home computers and multiple machinery monitors.

“Satellite connection services the remaining 40% of on-farm internet connection and it’s noted as being slower than connection via the Telstra mobile phone network, yet more reliable.

However a high level of contention for satellite data band width amongst users nationally means that this too is prone to congestion,” said Nigel.

Overall the theme of slow speeds and limited data allowances are comparatively more expensive rates dominated respondent’s feedback.

More than 88% of respondents felt disadvantaged by their current internet connection situation and cited impacts on their farm businesses in areas of safety, technology adoption, education and farm office management.

Exceeding monthly data allowances was a common theme of all those who were surveyed and this combined with slow speeds was a key area of frustration.

A comparison of the on-farm internet services via the Telstra mobile network was found to be around 14 times more expensive per GB than the town based internet service prices of ADSL. This equates to an urban ADSL of around \$0.45 per GB while on farm users pay around \$6.40 per GB.

Despite the on-farm connection costs being considerably more expensive, the cost was not a prominent reason for farmers feeling disadvantaged by the current situation.

Nigel said WA grain farmers are highly dependent on technology and machinery for productivity efficiency and economic gain.

“Hence the current issues with data access are having a significant impact on profitability margins and efficiency within the farming community as they are constrained by on-farm internet access.

“Internet access is a road block stopping the agricultural industry moving forward and harnessing technology to streamline many day to day activities taken for granted in urban businesses,” Nigel said.

With funding support from the Council of Grain Growers WA (COGGO) SEPWA will continue to pursue the issue with services providers and members of parliament to ensure the economic and social sustainability of WA grain growers for the future.

Photo caption- Wittenoom Hills farmer Chris Reichstein believes farmers are disadvantaged compared to townspeople with slower internet speed and higher costs when accessing data.

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