Satellite To Mobile: What It Really Means For Regional Australia

Description

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By Jennifer Medway, General Manager of the Regional Tech Hub

As a farmer and busy mum, I spend a lot of time in paddocks and on the road with little to no mobile coverage. So, when I first heard about “satellite to mobile” (STM) technology, also known as direct-to-handset, it sounded like the answer to all those frustrating moments of waving a phone around and unsent messages.

And in many ways, it *is* exciting. But as General Manager of the Regional Tech Hub, with regular access to some of the telcos’ brightest minds, I’ve learned we’ll need to manage our expectations. Myself included.

You’ve probably seen recent announcements from Telstra and Optus about their plans to deliver satellite connectivity directly to mobile phones. After months, and even years, of hype, it became a reality just last week with Telstra’s limited STM rollout on Samsung Galaxy S25 series handsets. Over the weekend, it expanded to Apple iPhone 13, iPhone 14, iPhone 15, or iPhone 16 (all models).

> But what does this actually *mean* for those of us living and working across rural, regional, and remote Australia?

Let's break it down.

Take Telstra's STM partnership with Starlink. This isn't just a plug-and-play setup with existing satellites. It requires an entirely new satellite constellation and updated device software to make it work. While the rollout is largely complete for consumers for texting, the journey to voice and data is complex and will take a bit longer.

There's some good news, though. I initially assumed this would be a paid add-on, but the STM rollout comes at no extra cost for Telstra customers on standard upfront plans. Even better, for many Samsung and Apple iPhone users, no new handset is required, just a software update. For most people, it's already happened automatically. However, if you have any issues or you manage updates manually, you'll need to go to your phone's settings and trigger the update yourself.

Not sure if it's active? If you have an eligible handset and are in areas with no coverage, check the signal bar on your phone. If you see a little satellite icon (Samsung phones) or the words "Telstra SpaceX" and "SAT" instead of 4G/5G (Apple iPhones), that means your device has switched to the satellite network for limited texting. The **Apple Emergency SOS texting** feature, available on iPhone 14 and newer, will also continue to work.

One of the interesting things I've learned through this process is that, despite Telstra leading the charge, to access this technology, a handset needs to have software that is satellite-capable. Handset manufacturers control the software rollout and decide which models are included. That all-important question of which phones get access to this technology actually rests with them. As a Google Pixel user, I might have to wait a bit longer…

After the experience of the 3G shutdown, Telstra is understandably cautious. Don't expect STM to suddenly 'kick in' the moment your coverage drops out. If your phone can detect even the faintest mobile signal, it's unlikely to switch to satellite. While frustrating, it is probably wise, at least for now.

Another challenge is that you can't manually switch to satellite. Gone are the days of toggling between 3G and 4G to chase a better signal. Even switching your phone to flight mode won't force an STM connection. And when it *does* work, just be patient, as text messages might take a few minutes to send, depending on your location, device, or the availability of the satellite. Not ideal in an emergency, but still, it's a start for those of us with no service at all.

That said, we're already seeing hints of what's possible. A friend's daughter went camping over the weekend in an area with zero coverage. It gave them peace of mind knowing she could send a

message if something went wrong. That kind of reassurance is hard to put a price on.

For our own farm, we're still weighing up whether a Starlink Mini in tractors and vehicles might be a more reliable failsafe for now. But STM's future looks promising.

I can't begin to imagine the level of engineering and software needed to make this happen, let alone what it will take to eventually support voice and data to mobile over Low Earth Orbit satellites. But what I *do* know is that incredibly smart people are working hard to make it happen. And like most things in the bush, patience is key.

While poor connectivity is still deeply frustrating, it's worth remembering that we now have access to technologies that didn't exist even six months ago. Yes, these solutions come at a cost, and in a season where budgets are tight, that's no small thing. However, the progress is real, and the possibilities are genuinely exciting.

Here, at the Regional Tech Hub, we'll keep sharing what we know as this technology evolves. We're just as hopeful and curious as you are, but we're also here to help you cut through the noise, separate fact from fiction, and figure out what's genuinely happening on the ground.

This isn't about shiny announcements. It's about whether you can contact someone for help, check in with your kids, or send a message, even when you're miles from the nearest phone tower with no coverage. On this basis, satellite-to-mobile technology is definitely a positive step forward.

Jen Medway *brings a unique perspective to regional telecommunications, combining firsthand experience as a sheep producer in Gunning, NSW, with her national role as General Manager of the Regional Tech Hub. With a background in agricultural innovation and policy, she understands both the practical frustrations of poor coverage on the ground and the opportunities emerging from new technology like satellite-to-mobile.*

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