

Questions must be answered on regional telecommunications

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"IN THE wake of the scrapping of the Federal Government's National Broadband Network tender process today the Prime Minister has opted for Plan B – and the stakes for regional communities are now higher," National Farmers' Federation (NFF) President David Crombie said.

"Today's announcement of a Government-led company to deliver fibre to the premise leaves many unanswered questions for people in rural and remote Australia. For example, when will their services be delivered, and at what price, and how will future upgrades be guaranteed?"

"We understand that around \$250 million for backhaul black-spots in regional Australia will be spent now, which is good news and will assist services, and that 90% of premises in towns of 1,000 people or more will have access to the new network when it arrives. For farmers and remote Australians a mix of wireless and satellite, at 12Mbps, will be available.

"However, regional Australia has already been left behind in regard to the technology boom and without specific attention the gap threatens to grow wider. The Government's new Plan must address the uncertainty over when its network will be in place for farmers and remote Australians and how future upgrades will be funded – on a guaranteed basis – given it abolished the perpetual \$2 billion Communications Fund funding stream.

"As of today, the Rudd Government must make access for rural and remote Australians fundamental to their new Plan. Only that level of focus, commitment and priority will have any chance of ensuring they can get quality, affordable, telecommunication services now and into the future.

"As the Prime Minister highlighted today, broadband technology is an economic driver, opening new doors and heralding new opportunities. It's vital for Australia's economic development and prosperity.

"Multiply that by an exponential factor and you start to get an inkling of its importance to regional families, businesses and communities, with its fundamental applications for modern farm systems, education delivery, healthcare services and social inclusion, being paramount.

"Modern farming is increasingly reliant on Information Communication Technology (ICT). From telemetry, GPS guided tractors and remote sensor irrigation devices, farming needs continued and sustained investment into core ICT infrastructure.

"Modern farming is part of the international marketplace. As such, farmers need super-fast broadband to offer their products, and in many cases their services, on the global market. Currency trading, import and export contracts, shipping movements and customer relationship management are all activities occurring through ICT today.

"But, at present, many farmers are dealing with satellite broadband that delivers not much

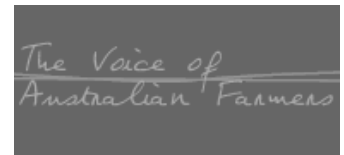
more than dial-up speeds. For copper wire broadband, ADSL2+ speeds are almost non-existent, and even the Telstra NextG network will have capacity limits on future speed upgrades due to pipeline bottlenecks.

“As the last two national accounts show, with agriculture keeping the economy afloat, Australia simply cannot afford for regional economies to be lumped with out-dated third-rate broadband technology.

“The Federal Government has a community service obligation to regional Australia to ensure equitable and price-comparable access to telecommunications, in line with metro Australia. We need our promised upgrades and we need them yesterday. This latest plan must deliver.”

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