

Talking Points - Mr Keith Besgrove

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- Thank you David [David Swift, ATUG chair].
- On behalf of the Department of Broadband, Communications and the Digital Economy, I would like to thank ATUG for the invitation to speak today.

Role of telecommunications in regional communities

- Access to effective telecommunications services is becoming more important to the way we live and work.
- However, regional Australians do not always have access to the services that you and I take for granted.
- Effective and reliable telecommunications can improve access to health, education, and emergency services.
- They can facilitate business and social opportunities important for economic development and sustainability.

- To this end, the Department is working to deliver a broad range of telecommunications initiatives to meet the needs of Regional Australians.

Recent announcements

- The Minister has described a number of the activities being undertaken by the Government to improve regional telecommunications.

National Broadband Network

- As mentioned by the Minister this morning, the Government has established a new company to build and operate a new superfast National Broadband Network.
- I will not go over this again today. Instead I will focus on the supporting initiatives aimed at improving services to regional communities that will complement the NBN.
- As part of the 2009-10 Budget, the Government announced the *Rural and Regional National Broadband Network Initiative*.
- As the Minister alluded to earlier, this \$80.3 million initiative builds on the NBN by supporting programs which will promote

the delivery and take-up of broadband services in regional areas.

- This initiative includes three key measures:
 - \$15.3 million additional funding to the ABC, to encourage the development of user generated content and create online avenues for local communities to connect and collaborate;
 - a \$14 million funding boost for the *Digital Regions Initiative*; and
 - \$5 million for *Rural NBN Coordinators*.

- The funding boost to the *Digital Regions Initiative* will bring the total program funding to \$60 million.

- This will allow the Government to support a greater number of broadband application projects in regional communities.

- If you are interested in being involved in a *Digital Regions Initiative* project, please contact the Department for further information.

- In addressing the need for greater backhaul infrastructure in regional areas, the Department has commenced work on the *Regional Backbone Blackspots Program*.
- This program will deliver much needed backhaul infrastructure to regional communities and promote competition.
- The Department recently ran a stakeholder consultation process on priority backhaul locations, which concluded on 12 May 2009.
- The Government is now considering this advice and will shortly undertake a competitive process to determine which parties will receive funding to address priority locations.
- To encourage the take-up of the broadband services provided by this program, the Government will appoint *Rural NBN Coordinators*.
- The coordinators will be assigned to regional backbone projects and be well placed to work with local governments and businesses.

Discussion Paper: *Regulatory Reform for 21st Century Broadband*

- In addition to the roll-out of the NBN, the Government is planning substantial revision of the current telecommunications regulatory regime.
- The Government has released a discussion paper titled *National Broadband Network: Regulatory Reform for 21st Century Broadband* and will consider key options for reform including:
 - strengthening the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission's powers to tackle anti-competitive conduct;
 - promoting greater competition across the industry, including measures to better address Telstra's vertical integration;
 - improving universal access arrangements for telephony and payphones; and
 - identifying appropriate consumer safeguards.
- In discussing possible consumer protections, the discussion paper has drawn heavily on concepts outlined by the Regional Telecommunications Review in the Glasson Report.
- Public submissions on the discussion paper close on 3 June 2009 and I encourage your input.

Australian Broadband Guarantee (ABG)

- As the telecommunications environment is continually changing, Government programs also evolve overtime.
- For example, the updated Australian Broadband Guarantee Program commenced on 4 August 2008.
- The program has a number of new features including:
 - higher data usage allowance;
 - increased incentive payments for remote areas; and
 - improved consumer protection measures.
- More than 51,000 broadband connections were directly subsidised through the program, between August 2007 and April 2009.
- There has been a lot of public interest in the new ABG Program.
- The Department has dispatched approximately 50,000 Broadband Service Availability Information Packs (financial year to date).

- And has received several thousand consumer-related enquiries on its dedicated 1800 broadband hotline during the first four months of this year.
- The program is fully operational with 16 registered providers offering a variety of service solutions across Australia.
- Applications to the current provider registration round closed on 30 April 2009.
- The Department received 5 applications and the assessment process is underway.

Regional Telecommunications Review

- The Department is also in the process of implementing its response to the Regional Telecommunications Review.
- An initial funding package of \$61.1 million has been allocated across three funded initiatives.
- The Minister mentioned these initiatives this morning, but I would like to briefly discuss them further.

- Firstly, \$11.4 million has been provided to continue and enhance the subsidies available under the *Satellite Phone Subsidy Scheme*.
- This enhanced scheme is aimed at Australians living and working in areas without terrestrial mobile coverage.
- It also includes increased access to subsidies for emergency service and health organisations.
- The Government understands the importance of access to appropriate telecommunication services in regional areas, particularly in emergency situations.
- The Victorian bushfires have highlighted the importance of emergency services being able to communicate with each other, especially in situations of crisis.
- The enhanced *Satellite Phone Subsidy Scheme* will enable emergency service organisations to access additional handsets to carry out their vital work in areas with little or no terrestrial mobile coverage.

- Secondly, as mentioned previously, the \$60 million *Digital Regions Initiative* will fund innovative broadband applications for improved education, health and emergency services.
- These applications will be delivered through collaboration between Commonwealth, State, Territory and local governments.
- Thirdly, an additional \$3.7 million has been allocated to the refocused *Indigenous Communications Program*, which now totals \$30 million.
- Some Indigenous communities live in the most remote areas of Australia, where it is difficult to access even the most basic telecommunications service.
- In these communities, the availability of even a basic communications service can be the difference between life or death.
- The refocused *Indigenous Communications Program* is aimed at ensuring remote Indigenous communities receive greater

access to improved services and flexible solutions to address their telecommunications needs.

- The program will provide essential telecommunications services, basic public internet access facilities and computer training for remote Indigenous communities.
- Addressing the telecommunications needs of Indigenous communities remains an ongoing challenge for the Department.
- If any of you here today have connections with remote Indigenous communities, I strongly encourage you to become involved in this program.
- In addition to these initiatives, the Department is also working on a number of Regional Telecommunications Review recommendations that were placed on hold.
- This work will be informed by progress on other actions, including responses to the previously mentioned regulatory discussion paper and the backhaul program.

Australian Communications Consumer Action Network (ACCAN)

- In addition to ATUG, one of the Government's key stakeholders will be the Australian Communications Consumer Action Network (ACCAN).
- The Government has previously identified facilitating effective consumer representation as a key priority for the telecommunications industry.
- ACCAN has been funded to be the peak communications consumer advocacy body, responsible for coordinating the diverse views of consumers.
- It will be responsible for providing definitive consumer position on topical communications issues.
- It will participate in industry and government processes, including self-regulatory activities and government/industry enquiries.
- And its authoritative and coordinated consumer perspective will be informed by consultation with its members and evidence-based research outcomes.

- Standing and Expert Advisory Committees will be established to develop policy positions and recommendations on current issues.
- These committees will be made up of interested consumer representatives drawn from ACCAN's membership.
- ACCAN has also been tasked with making consumers more aware of their rights and enabling them to make more informed choices to enhance their consumer experience.
- It will provide information to consumers via web resources and publications.
- ACCAN will also engage in other education activities such as training volunteer consumer advocates and outreach to regional and rural areas.

Spectrum

- The Government is currently undertaking an assessment into the future spectrum management arrangements for Australia, with key spectrum licences expiring from 2013 on.

- The efficient use of spectrum will play a critical role in delivering new technologies such as next generation wireless services.
- The Government has announced that the 10 per cent of Australians not connected to fibre-to-the-premise broadband as part of the NBN will receive next generation wireless and satellite services.
- The Government is considering opportunities for spectrum arrangements that support these new and emerging technologies.
- A discussion paper titled *Public criteria for re-issue of spectrum licences* has been released and submissions close on 19 June 2009.
- Improvements in spectrum arrangements have the potential to realise a 'digital dividend' for regional areas by releasing spectrum to enable the delivery of further wireless services.

Digital Switchover

- Between 2010 and 2013, analog free-to-air television signals will be switched off and replaced with digital-only signals across Australia.
- Analog signals will be turned off through a phased approach; the first location is in the Victorian Sunraysia (Mildura) region, in the first half of 2010.
- To ensure a smooth transition to digital television, the Government has announced a number of initiatives.
- These include a research program, a logo and labeling scheme and a national TV and radio communications campaign, launched on 5 April.

Independent Disability Equipment Program

- The Government recognises that access to affordable communications products and services can help lessen some of the additional challenges faced by people with disabilities.
- Earlier this year, the Government announced that it would undertake a feasibility study into whether a disability equipment program that is independent of telecommunications carriers should be established.

- The Department is currently conducting the study with the aim of determining the needs of this sector, whether or not those needs are being met and if not, possible solutions.
- The study will investigate the efficiency of the current arrangements and analyse emerging technologies and demand.
- In undertaking this study, the Department is consulting with a broad range of stakeholders including:
 - not-for-profit organisations;
 - disability representatives and people with all types of disabilities; and
 - industry, including carriers and equipment service providers.

Conclusion

- The Department is continually working to achieve the best telecommunications outcomes for regional Australians.
- The programs and initiatives I have mentioned today are just some of the key areas of development that will help to deliver enhanced telecommunication services to regional Australia.

- The Department will continue to work with key stakeholders such as ATUG to enhance the wellbeing of regional Australians.
- Thank you again for the opportunity to speak today and I am looking forward to this afternoon's panel discussion on Clever Networks Projects.