Media release

Broadband for the Bush Forum – Remote, Connected and Savvy!

Fremantle, 21-23 June 2017

Addressing the issues of availability and affordability of telecommunication services (mobile, voice and data), setting minimum service standards and guarantees, advancing digital literacy and empowerment remain key priorities to work toward a digitally connected and empowered remote Australia.

There was an overwhelming renewed call for the development and adoption of a Remote Telecommunications Strategy and for Indigenous Digital Inclusion Index to become a Closing the Gap measure by Forum delegates at the sixth annual Forum of the Broadband for the Bush Alliance held in Fremantle 21-23 June. Organised by the Broadband for the Bush Alliance, a national, not-for-profit organisation dedicated to digitally advance rural and remote Australia, the Forum attracted over 150 delegates from across Australia.

Forum delegates articulated a set of key recommendations, which can inform the development of a coordinated Remote Telecommunications Strategy. Key recommendations include:

- Expand mobile coverage in remote Australia via a Mobile Black Spots program specifically targeted at remote Australia where current business models fail.
- Long-term Infrastructure Planning to expand terrestrial network coverage to address congestion in the NBN satellite footprint and service outages in monsoonal Northern Australia, including via wireless and shared infrastructure models.
- Increased data allocation for all SkyMuster services, including business-grade managed services and Public internet Premises product.
- Unmetered access to online government services and other essential services.
- Support shires/regions to develop Digital Development Plans to address local needs, maximise engagement and promote social, cultural and economic development.
- An ongoing IT training and Digital Mentors support program, flexible to local needs and locally relevant strategies.
- Increased Medicare item numbers to be available for Telehealth including for GP and allied health professional consultations.
- Savings made in Patient Travel by implementing telehealth be passed on to the Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation responsible for coordinating the telehealth consultation.

At the Indigenous Focus Day, Forum delegates identified the very low level of digital inclusion for Indigenous people, particularly in remote Australia as a barrier to improve social and economic development outcomes.

As digital inclusion can drive opportunities for employment, enterprise development, and access to more affordable products and services, forum delegates called for a dedicated Indigenous Digital Inclusion Strategy, which would address:

- Data collection to measure whether remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community members have available to them the minimal requirements in terms of access, availability, affordability and digital literacy to access online services.
- Prioritisation of the roll-out of broadband services to identified remote Indigenous communities that do not have minimal community wide online access.
- Provision of public Internet access to the identified communities through community WiFi systems.
- Implementation of unmetered access to online government services (including MyGov), banking, education, employment and health services.
- Roll-out of a culturally appropriate digital literacy program for remote community members.
- A Community Digital Mentors program to provide meaningful community-based jobs in remote communities to support digital engagement, literacy and support via a peer learning model.

Full Forum Communique can be accessed at broadbandforthebush.com.au/documents

Contact

Apolline Kohen
Forum and Broad band for the Bush Alliance Chair
Mobile: 0400 688 386
Email: chair@broadbandforthebush.com.au

Daniel Featherstone
Indigenous Focus Day
General Manager, Indigenous Remote Communications Association
Mobile: 0437 798 076
Email: manager@irca.net.au