

## **Broadband for the Bush – Unlocking the digital potential of the Bush!**

The unrelenting focus on satellite as the primary means of delivering broadband communication services to small remote and regional communities will short-change many Australians who could receive faster and more reliable services through alternative technology solutions and gain leverage for mobile coverage.

This was a key theme that emerged from the fourth annual Forum of the Broadband for the Bush Alliance, held in Darwin from July 14 – 16. The Forum heard that additional consideration is required for the 3 per cent of Australians living in areas targeted to receive a satellite solution under current NBN policy.

The Forum also discussed the need for a coordinated Remote Australian Digital Strategy that also incorporates discussion of acceptable service levels and the need for greater training and education regarding online services.

The Forum recognised that the existing NBN strategy is part of the solution, but not the whole solution. While the NBN's Long Term Satellite Solution will ultimately provide an upgraded service for many remote Australians, questions remain regarding its ability to meet long term community communications access needs, particularly during periods of heavy rain. Hence it is important to investigate alternate delivery models where possible.

Delegates discussed numerous strategies and case studies relating to remote service delivery, including use of alternative service delivery technologies and models that ensure greater equity of access. Delegates also heard how in many cases communities would receive communication services via satellite, despite close proximity to fibre backhaul connections.

As more and more government, education and healthcare services are delivered online policy makers need to be more aware of the limitations that existing delivery models place on uptake of these services.

Failure to flexibly address remote communications needs will ultimately lead to a failure in closing the digital divide that exists between urban and remote Australia.

The Forum called for:

- Further extensions to mobile coverage in remote areas through black-spot remediation programs.
- Investigation of alternate last-mile delivery options, including community Wi-Fi.
- Investigation of excising essential services such as education, healthcare and government services from data limits.
- More targeted programs are needed to build confidence and awareness of relevant digital content.
- Acceleration of the uptake of Tele-Health and Tele-Care as mainstream practice.

Presenters delivered a diverse range of firsthand accounts of opportunities and activities that digital connectivity enables. The Forum provided the Chair of the Regional Telecommunications Review Panel specific examples of difficulties encountered by those seeking better connectivity and services.

The Broadband for the Bush Alliance is a not-for-profit organisation dedicated to influencing policy makers through sustained and persuasive representation to digitally advance remote Australia.

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