



*Digital Journeys*

## **COMMUNIQUE**

The Broadband for the Bush Alliance is a not-for-profit organisation speaking for the digital needs of remote regions and seeks to advance the digital capacity and capability for those who work and live in remote Australia.

Delegates at the fifth annual Forum of the Broadband for the Bush Alliance held in Brisbane 8 and 9 June 2016 identified improving availability and affordability of services, setting minimum service standards and guarantees, advancing digital literacy and empowerment as key priorities to bridge the digital divide between the bush and metropolitan areas. An Indigenous Focus Day, focussing on indigenous communities' digital issues was held immediately prior to the Forum and the output of that day is incorporated into this communiqué.

The Forum called for the formulation of a *Remote Telecommunications Strategy* that identifies the unique characteristics faced by rural and remote people. Without the *strategy* to drive policy and inform those not attuned to rural and remote realities the result is a one-size-fit -all infrastructure and digital engagement framework the digital divide for the bush will expand.

Delegates grouped their call for action under four key areas – availability, affordability, service standards, digital literacy and empowerment. The Broadband for the Bush Alliance was tasked with leading the creation of the Remote Telecommunications Strategy with all organisations and individuals committing resources and intelligence to assist the process. The strategy will be delivered to politicians, policy makers, infrastructure providers and major stakeholders to influence future developments.

The Forum brought together decision makers and representatives from across regional and remote Australia, including residents, community groups, public and private sector organisations, technical experts and various parties with an interest in remote communications and services.

Delegates heard from nbn co on the recently available SkyMuster™ service, the government's satellite broadband services for up to 400,000 premises in rural, remote and regional regions. Organisations such as ICPA and BIRRR gave practical input into early connection issues. In 2015 the Forum called for unmetered education access and the recent availability of an education port for registered distant education schoolchildren was welcomed. However, the data allowances, peak to off-peak data split and the relative cost of retail plans highlighted the inequity that still remains for those in the bush.

Presentations from experts on the four Forum streams, digital adoption in business, future services, digital inclusion and policy for better outcomes and delegate contributions showed that the key factors of availability, service delivery and digital inclusion can be improved through a number of initiatives such as better government programs (e.g. greater penetration of nbn terrestrial infrastructure in rural & remote areas, redesigned mobile black spot program), seeking alternative service delivery technologies, and unmetered (but not unlimited) data allowance for key on-line government services.

A keynote presentation from Helen Milner from the UK organisation Tinder Foundation, painted a picture of how a rethink of the digital inclusion away from a cost basis to the economic impact and social advantage would benefit Australians. The savings government gains from its service delivery responsibilities was inspiring and an example federal and state governments can embrace.

The Productivity Commission enquiry into the Universal Service Obligation (USO) could impact the service delivered to the bush for several generations. The double hop voice over internet protocol, public phones and inclusion of broadband and mobiles into the USO (as recommended by two Regional Telecommunications Reviews) are major issues affecting future digital services.

## Our Thanks

We acknowledge the Forum Ambassador Brad Howarth who moderated the event and provided guidance to the Forum Committee. We also acknowledge the leadership of the Forum coordinator, Apolline Kohen in developing the program and managing the event.

## Recommendations

In light of the Forum, the Broadband for the Bush Alliance makes a number of recommendations regarding broadband policy and action for remote and regional Australia grouped under four major headings.

### 1. Availability of digital infrastructure and services.

- Recommendation: To reduce mobile network infrastructure providers' costs to the limited markets in remote regions the Australian Government grant at no cost 700MHZ digital dividend spectrum to mobile infrastructure providers.
- Recommendation: That there is expanded penetration of NBN fibre and wireless infrastructure into remote and regional Australia to reduce SkyMuster™ congestion, a satellite phenome common to satellite solutions.
- Recommendation: That the government allocates mobile backhaul from the nbn satellite (or other government satellite bandwidth) so as to increase mobile base stations in remote Australia.
- Recommendation: That there is bipartisan support for continuation of the mobile black spot programme, and that the program criteria not be restricted by economic viability or technology when assessed for remote mobile base station funding.
- Recommendation: That the government immediately initiate research and investigation into long-range mobile coverage solutions and alternative solutions offered by new technologies that offer lower cost mobile infrastructure to remote regions.
- Recommendation: That telecommunications be included as a key component of the government's Northern Australia Development policy as digital engagement using multiple digital platforms underpins economic and social development.
- Recommendation: That government increases the fibre network within northern Australia in order to mitigate the impact of extreme climatic events.

### 2. Better affordability for those living in rural and remote Australia.

- Recommendation: That nbn co remains a publicly owned utility operating the core broadband infrastructure.
- Recommendation: That the government creates universal unmetered (but not unlimited) online access to health, government services, education services and banking for remote residents and NGOs to address tyranny of distance (conceptually similar to extended zones charging).
- Recommendation: development of an affordability strategy to target measures for rural and remote communities (for Indigenous communities to be included as a Closing the Gap indicator).
- Recommendation: That there are standards and a coordinated approach to Wi-Fi in remote communities – building on public phones and Public Internet Premises model (joint government WiFi strategy) and use of mobile VoIP service via WiFi.

### 3. Service standards and guarantees.

- Recommendation: The establishment of an independent remote and rural telecommunications advisory body to advise government and other stakeholders on appropriate programmes that deliver real outcomes for the bush.
- Recommendation: The establishment of a remote-targeted customer service and helpdesk support to give priority assistance and advice on service difficulties and remedies.
- Recommendation: The development of appropriate (content and data file size) on-line consumer guide for nbn satellite products.
- Recommendation: That the Broadband for the Bush Alliance contribute to USO Review to include mobile, data and pre-paid.
- Recommendation: That the Broadband for the Bush Alliance contribute to reforming the Customer Service Guarantee to include data services and reliability measures, as per RTIRC recommendations.
- Recommendation: That remote digital infrastructure is created by government and that data is regularly updated and made publically available.
- Recommendation: That the Broadband for the Bush Alliance advocates for SkyMuster™ higher peak period data limits.

#### 4. Advancement of digital literacy and empowerment.

- Recommendation: The establishment of a single advocacy body for Digital Literacy.
- Recommendation: That the Broadband for the Bush Alliance advocate for co-designed and appropriate remote-focussed Digital Literacy programs.
- Recommendation: That the Broadband for the Bush Alliance encourages the design and promotion of digital Mentors/Champions programs.

## Moving forward

Delegates committed resources (materials and expert knowledge) to the Broadband for the Bush Alliance in order to contribute to the formulation of a **Remote Telecommunications Strategy**. The strategy will be a comprehensive document for all stakeholders to better inform on digital infrastructure and digital literacy in rural and remote Australia. Without a **Remote Telecommunications Strategy**, the digital divide between cities and country will surely increase.

### Key Outcomes Summary

- A **Remote Telecommunications Strategy** to drive policy and inform those not attuned to rural and remote realities ensure digital inclusion of the most excluded group in Australia and dump the one-size-fits-all policy model that clearly does not address the unique characteristics faced by rural and remote peoples;
- Creation of a digital literacy action plan (to educate and inform) co-designed and appropriate to remote communities and homesteads;
- nbn policy changes to expand nbn co infrastructure into remote regions thereby delivering advantages across multiple fronts;
- Unmetered satellite data for specific purposes and WiFi centric solutions for greater services penetration;
- A rural & remote independent advisory body to advise on issues such as customer service, help desk support, USO reviews, statistical collection of data inputs for digital engagement and SkyMuster™ peak data limits.

## About the Broadband for the Bush Forum V

The fifth Broadband for the Bush Forum: Digital Journeys took place on 8th and 9th June 2016, at the State Library Queensland, Southbank campus, Brisbane.

The Forum offered a unique opportunity to give voice to residents of remote and regional Australia, examining the problems they face stemming from poor access to digital infrastructure (voice, data and mobile) and the possibilities an educated digital literate remote Australians offers for digital inclusion in terms of economic participation, social advancement and community sustainability.

Presenters delivered a diverse range of firsthand accounts of digital adoption and empowerment. Across the two-days, the Forum focused on four themes that enlightened the audience and demonstrated to delegates positive examples of digital journeys. The four Forum themes were: digital adoption in business, future services, digital inclusion and policy for better outcomes.

The Forum program emphasised the role of broadband communications as a critical enabler and for better digital literacy and an enabler for innovation and economic empowerment for rural and remote Australia.

The Forum was attended by more than 110 delegates, and featured presentations from government, academia, Indigenous groups, research organisations, telecommunications companies, technology innovators, not-for-profit organisations and the broader commercial sector.

A special mention to our sponsor, without whom the annual Broadband for the Bush Forum would not be possible. The Forum is the only national annual conference dedicated to exploring and highlighting digital issues to rural and remote Australians. The Alliance, a member organisation, faces financial challenges to stage the event and sincerely acknowledges the generous contribution of our sponsors in supporting rural and remote regions.

### Principal



### Silver



### Bronze



## Contacts and further information

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All Broadband for the Bush Forum V materials can be downloaded here:

[http:// http://broadbandforthebush.com.au/broadband-for-the-bush-forum-v-2016/](http://http://broadbandforthebush.com.au/broadband-for-the-bush-forum-v-2016/)