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Digital Connectivity: What next? - Broadband for the Bush Forum VII.

June 6 -8 Darwin 2018

The seventh annual Broadband for the Bush Forum held in Darwin in June attracted close to 200 participants from across Australia. It included a live session streamed to several local meet-ups around Australia including Perth and Canberra.

Organised by the national not-for–profit the Broadband for the Bush Alliance (B4BA) the 2018 Forum focused on how to progress digital participation in relation to affordability, digital skills and connectivity for rural and remote Australia around the theme of "Digital Connectivity: What Next?"

Since its establishment in 2011 the Alliance has contributed significantly to many developments in regional telecommunications. Achievements to date include informing and supporting the NBN Skymuster rollout and Public Interest Premises strategy and the expansion of Wi-Fi services in remote communities and homelands. The Alliance has done much also to inform co-investment programs that have led to more mobile coverage including affordable pre-paid plans.

"The Broadband for the Bush Forum has firmly established itself as an ongoing national conversation gathering all parties together to inform policy and deliver better broadband and skills for those in rural and remote Australia", said Broadband for the Bush Alliance Chair Apolline Kohen.

"From this Forum there is a renewed call to shift the focus from connectivity to increasing the delivery of effective digital skills for rural and remote Australia. In particular there is a high need for targeted investment in digital literacy programs especially for indigenous and isolated communities," said Kohen.

The annual Indigenous Focus Day (IFD), facilitated by Christine Ross prior to the B4B Forum, provided insight into indigenous communities' telecommunication challenges with a number of community workshops identifying how progress could be made towards better digital inclusion for indigenous communities.

Forum delegates came from a range of government agencies, public and private sector organisations and included technical experts and most importantly residents and community groups living in rural and remote Australia.

Speakers presented a range of papers across the four forum streams – *Bridging the Gap, Working Smarter, Living on the Edge* and *Agile Government* - sharing their experiences and projects; providing important updates on technology as well as the latest policy developments and future thinking.

Featured presentations included an address on Indigenous culture in a digital society by Leonard Hill from the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet; updates on the NBN rollout by Sylvia Spaseski (Department of Communications) and Gavin Williams (nbn.

Co); Geraldine Lim (Facebook) on how to build an informed community; and Janet Kosic (Darwin Innovation Hub) with Dan Gerich from Uber Air discussing some of the innovative work coming out of the newly established Darwin Innovation Hub.

One of the key conversations running through the three days was the forthcoming work of the newly established 2018 Regional Telecommunications Independent Review. Presentations from Review Chair Sean Edwards and ACCC Deputy Chair Delia Richard highlighted the opportunity to contribute to this important review so maximum benefit of digital technologies can be gained by all communities across Australia.

In a first for the Forum, the ABC's Big Ideas program recorded a panel session facilitated by presenter Cathy Van Extel. The panel featured Daniel Featherstone (Indigenous Remote Communications Association), Tiani Cook (NT Isolated Children's Parents Association) and Jim Wyatt (Optimi Digital). Discussion centered on the need for local digital solutions to address the unique challenges for people living in remote stations, communities and towns across Australia. The need for policy makers and corporations to have deep and ongoing conversations with communities as a central feature of any telecommunications rollout was a key theme throughout this discussion. The session will be broadcast later this month.

About Broadband for the Bush Alliance

The Broadband for the Bush Alliance is a national not-for-profit organisation that seeks to advance the digital capacity and capability of people who work and live in remote Australia through access to better broadband services and increased digital inclusiveness. The Alliance is the trusted and united voice for remote and rural Australians, which brings together a range of stakeholders with expertise in communications, remote service delivery, and community engagement.

The vision is to ensure all remote and rural Australians have access to the highest standard of broadband technology so as to be digitally engaged and have the access and skills they need to leverage their digital participation for greater social and economic amenity.

Media Contacts

Apolline Kohen
Forum and Broadband 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