

Monday 9 March 2009

PR/037/09

Government must address rural and regional telecommunications questions

The NSW Farmers' Association believes the Federal Government's response to the Regional Telecommunications Independent Review Committee (RTIRC) report leaves many questions unanswered for the rural and regional sector.

NSW Farmers' Association President Jock Laurie says the Government has deferred its response to many of the recommendations in the report until the outcome of the National Broadband Network (NBN) process has been finalised.

"The RTIRC report recognised that telecommunications services in rural NSW are substandard, finding that services, specifically mobile services and the availability of broadband internet access in rural and regional Australia are still inadequate," Mr Laurie said.

"Our concern with the Government's response and its link to the NBN is that, to date, the NBN has provided no outcomes or commitment to rural Australia," Mr Laurie said.

"People living in rural and regional communities have already lost vital funding for telecommunications, including \$2 billion from the now defunct Communications Fund, and \$958 million from the cancelled 'Australia Connect' program.

"These telecommunications programs had been designed to specifically deliver improved services and infrastructure to rural and regional areas, but the almost \$3 billion in funds have since been rolled into the NBN, which currently provides no guarantee that they will be used in such a manner.

"The Government response has outlined a commitment of only \$60 million to rural telecommunications. This is just a drop in the ocean compared to the \$3 billion that has gone into the NBN.

"The Association would like to see the full \$400 million, originally identified by the Government for the response to the RTIRC report, used to fund projects specifically benefiting rural Australia," Mr Laurie said.

The Association's comments come following numerous submissions on telecommunications, stressing the importance of a priority approach to the NBN network, whereby broadband infrastructure would be improved in the areas most lacking first.

"Farmers and people in rural communities rely on telecommunications for their businesses, just like all other Australians. However, unlike other Australians, those who live in rural and regional Australia do not have adequate access to telecommunications services," Mr Laurie said.

"Thus, the need to focus on regional areas is of paramount importance - as is the need for regular, independent reviews of rural and regional telecommunications.

"The Communications Fund was originally set up to fund such reviews and implement the resulting recommendations. But in the absence of such a fund, one would ask how the Government plans to fund such recommendations," Mr Laurie concluded.

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