

Issue

NSW Farmers Association and the National Farmers' Federation have been extremely active participants in the telecommunications debate. The Association has played a key role in leading the debate about rural and remote telecommunications services, particularly in terms of highlighting key service and market failures. The Association's key areas of interest include mobile telephone services and broadband internet.

Mobile Telecommunications

- *Next G*
 - Third Generation (3G) networks are wide-area cellular telephone networks which can incorporate high speed internet access and video telephony.
 - 3G technology offers improved, high speed mobile telephone services (video calling, rich content, music services, wireless broadband) across a national network with faster speeds, wider coverage and improved services.
 - Next G is one of Telstra's 3G networks. A new range of handsets and related accessories is currently being developed in order to maximise the benefits of Next G technology.
 - Telstra is currently promoting the LG 550 to the rural market. It is vitally important that customers ensure patch cords (adapter cable enabling connection to external CDMA aerial) are available if this handset is to be purchased. Telstra will also be launching the new ZTE F158 and F165 ruggedised 'farmers/tradesman' handsets in the near future.
 - The Association and NFF have urged members to maintain use of their CDMA handsets for as long as possible or until appropriate Next G handsets, accessories and equipment are available.
 - Before purchasing new equipment to enable transition to the Next G network, members should:
 - have a detailed discussion with the local Farm Communications Representative about individual mobile telephone requirements (eg where you live, what you use your phone for, how much you travel and so on);
 - ensure that the handset has an access point for direct connection to your new or existing CDMA external aerial and the appropriate patch cord to enable the phone to be directly connected to the aerial.
- *CDMA 'Switch Off'*
 - The Next G network will eventually replace the CDMA network.
 - The Australian Government has issued a draft licence condition to Telstra requiring them to keep the CDMA network open until the Next G network provides equivalent or better coverage and services. Telstra had previously announced that CDMA would be 'switched off' 28 January 2008.
 - The Australian Communications and Media Authority will be undertaking independent coverage audits of both the CDMA and Next G networks to ensure coverage and service equivalence is achieved prior to the CDMA network being 'switched off'.
 - The Association is seeking assurances from Telstra that rural customers currently utilising CDMA Wireless Local Loop for landline purposes will not be adversely affected by the removal of this technology from a voice quality, services, maintenance and/or pricing perspective.
- *Next G Feedback*
 - The Australian Government has just launched a Next G Customer Support Unit on freecall 1800 883 488. The Customer Support Unit aims to ensure that consumers are able to report any problems they are experiencing with the switch to Next G.
 - The Telstra website also includes a section where feedback on mobile black spots can be provided. It is aimed at the reporting of black spots where Telstra indicates it has mobile or wireless coverage but it does not perform to expectations, such as the line may drop out, the call may have poor reception or there may be little or no reception at all. 'Bright spots' can also be reported if customer expectations have been exceeded and mobile or wireless coverage has emerged in an area where it has not been experienced previously. 'Black spots' & 'Bright spots' can also be reported on 125 111.

Internet Telecommunications

- *Australia Connected*

- The Australian Government's *Australia Connected* funding and legislative package aims to ensure that high-speed broadband¹ is available to 99% of Australians through a mix of technologies. Regardless of the technology that is used, a minimum speed of 12 megabits per second (Mbps) is also guaranteed. It will take three years for the program to be rolled out with an initial speed of up to 6Mbps, increasing to 12 Mbps by 30 June 2009.
- The Australia Connected package includes the Broadband Connect infrastructure program.
- Broadband Connect
 - The Federal Government announced 18 June 2007 that OPEL (a joint venture between Optus and Elders) had won the tender to help improve access to broadband services. The new national high speed network will be rolled out by OPEL, which was awarded \$958m in funding from the Broadband Connect infrastructure program and an additional funding allocation.
 - OPEL is a wholesale-only business which will offer wholesale services to its joint venture partners as well as other service providers on an open and transparent basis.
 - OPEL will offer its broadband products over its Wimax wireless and ADSL2+ networks at standard metropolitan comparable prices.
 - For a large number of Australians living in rural and regional Australia, this will mean that high speed broadband will be delivered via wireless technology.
 - The Association is currently reviewing the nature and detail of the OPEL initiative, seeking to address member concerns about the potential for duplication of infrastructure and possible network limitations in remote areas.

- *Australian Broadband Guarantee*

- The government has made a commitment to provide affordable metro comparable broadband to the remaining 1% of Australians through the roll out of the Australian Broadband Guarantee (\$162.5m). The objective of the Australian Broadband Guarantee (ABG) is to provide access to affordable metro-comparable broadband services for all Australians.
- The ABG guidelines enable a metro-comparable price for all Australians for a broadband service level of 512/128 kilobits per second – 500 megabyte service threshold. Providers can offer services below and above this, however it will be the business or personal choice of consumers as to whether they opt for a service above this threshold (which may be at greater cost).

- *Broadband Assistance*

- The Australian Government recently launched BroadbandNow, a one-stop consumer help centre offering a unique broadband information service to all Australians.
- BroadbandNow, which is located within the Department of Communications, Information Technology and the Arts, provides information for consumers on a range of broadband topics including:
 - How to obtain access broadband;
 - What each of the various broadband technologies means for consumers; and
 - Whether individual consumers are eligible for government assistance programs such as the Australian Broadband Guarantee (ABG)
- BroadbandNow can be accessed online at www.broadbandnow.gov.au, including a broadband service locator for consumers to identify the various broadband services available to them at their premises. It can also be accessed via a freecall hotline on 1800 883 488 (8am-9pm AEST Mon-Fri).

Telecommunications Industry Ombudsman

- The Telecommunications Industry Ombudsman (TIO) is a free and independent alternative dispute resolution scheme for small business and residential consumers in Australia with unresolved complaints about their telephone or internet services.
- If you have tried to resolve your complaint with your telecommunications provider and the matter has not been resolved, please contact the TIO.
- Further information is available at <http://www.tio.com.au/> or via a freecall hotline 1800 062 058.

¹ *Broadband is a term used to describe fast, 'always-on' access to the Internet. This means having faster access to better multimedia services and applications, bigger data files and new communication services.*