

## Issue

The 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

- The Federal Minister for Broadband, Communications and the Digital Economy, Senator the Hon Stephen Conroy, announced on 18 January 2008 that the planned closure of the CDMA network would be postponed by three months from Telstra's planned 28 January 2008 switch-off.
- The announcement followed independent coverage audits of both the CDMA and Next G networks by the Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA) (a copy of the ACMA report can be found here- *CDMA-Next G Coverage Equivalence*) and extensive feedback from NSW Farmers Association members via the Association's Next G survey (see below).
- Telstra has been asked to provide advice to the Minister by 1 February 2008 on how they will address the issues that have been identified in the ACMA report, as well as the rectifications to enable the Minister to reconsider the matter. The extensive problems with CDMA Wireless Local Loop and Telstra's recommended migration to Next G Wireless Link were noted by the Minister as a particular concern.
- The Association conducted a member survey on Next G in January 2008. Members were given less than a week to respond to the short survey. More than 1200 responses were received, with more than 800 members asking for their details to be passed on to Telstra to discuss their Next G concerns. At that time, more than 20% of members were yet to make the switch to Next G, despite the originally planned switch-off date being less than a fortnight away. Members also reported a range of significant problems with Next G coverage and service.
- The Association has asked Telstra Country Wide to provide advice on how the range of problems identified by members in the Association's Next G survey will be rectified before the CDMA network is switched off.
- The new proposed CDMA switch-off date is 28 April 2008, pending the Minister's approval.
- For further information on Next G, please see the Association's Next G Briefing Note.

### • Next G Wireless Link

- Next G Wireless Link (Next G WL) will replace CDMA Wireless Local Loop (WLL) when it is proven that Next G provides equivalent or better coverage and services than the CDMA Network. After that point, customers seeking (at least) a standard telephone service will have two options available:
  - Uptake Next G Wireless Link (WL), or
  - Uptake a service under the Universal Service Obligation (USO).
- It is important to note that Next G WL is a mobile service, not a standard fixed telephone service, and as such, will not be covered by the USO or the Customer Service Guarantee (CSG).
- Association members considering migrating to Next G WL have expressed concern about the impacts of power outages over long periods of time (2-3 days); the compatibility of faxes with Next G WL; and about future pricing arrangements. The Association has communicated these concerns to Telstra Country Wide and is hopeful that they can be addressed to the satisfaction of members.
- The Association has encouraged members to discuss any concerns regarding the Next G WL service with Telstra. If members are not adequately satisfied that the service meets their needs, they have the right to request a fixed service under the USO from the universal service provider. This service will then be covered under both the USO and CSG. Fixed services under the USO may be delivered via a range of different technologies, most likely satellite technology.
- For further information on Next G WL, please see the Association's Next G Wireless Link Briefing Note.

## Internet Telecommunications

### • *Australia Connected*

- The Australian Government's *Australia Connected* funding and legislative package aims to ensure that high-speed broadband<sup>1</sup> 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](http://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.

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<sup>1</sup> *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.*