

## Issue

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 follows independent coverage audits of both the CDMA and Next G networks and extensive feedback from NSW Farmers Association members, most recently via the Association's Next G Survey.

## Background

- Next G is one of Telstra's Third Generation (3G) networks. Third Generation 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.
- The former Federal Government placed a licence condition on Telstra to keep the CDMA network open until the Next G network provides "equivalent or better coverage and services".
  - Whilst Telstra announced in late 2007 that equivalence had been reached, the Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA) announced that independent coverage audits of both the CDMA and Next G networks would be undertaken to assess whether equivalence had in fact been reached.
- Mobile telephone coverage and service are also key items of discussion in the *Regional Telecommunications Review* currently being undertaken by the Regional Telecommunications Independent Review Committee. The Committee is in the process of reviewing the adequacy of telecommunications services in regional, rural and remote parts of Australia, and will visit a range of rural, regional and remote areas in the first half of 2008.
- Following a range of criticisms and confusion about Next G performance in mid-2007, the former Federal Government launched a Next G Customer Support Unit (freecall 1800 883 488). The purpose of the Customer Support Unit was to ensure consumers were able to report any problems they were experiencing with the switch to Next G. Telstra's *Black Spots Bright Spots* program (phone 125 111) also enabled telecommunications customers to report both positive and negative experiences with mobile coverage.
- A new range of handsets and related accessories were developed in order to maximise the benefits of Next G technology. In order to assist rural customers to identify the most suitable handset and accessories for their individual needs, Telstra launched a 'Blue Tick' campaign in July 2007.

## Recent Association Activities

- The Association conducted a member survey on Next G in early January 2008. Despite members being given less than a week to respond, more than 1200 responses were received. The survey found that:
  - 23% of respondents had not yet made the switch to Next G
  - 71% of respondents had found the CDMA network to be more reliable than the new Next G network
  - 36% of respondents had difficulty acquiring appropriate accessories
  - 38% of respondents said that reception did not change when a car-kit was used
  - More than 800 respondents asked the Association to pass on their details to Telstra to discuss their individual Next G concerns
  - Other commonly reported problems with the Next G network included in-call drop outs, handset performance, car-kit reliance, poor and unreliable reception and Message Bank problems.
- The survey results were provided to the National Farmers' Federation to assist their urgent discussions with the Federal Government regarding national feedback from farmers on the Next G network.
- In December 2007, the Association also provided input to the National Farmers' Federation submission to the Federal Government seeking a delay in the proposed 28 January 2008 switch-off of the CDMA network.

## Where To From Here

- The ACMA report, released by Senator Conroy 18 January 2008, found that the Next G footprint is equivalent to the CDMA network, and that Next G coverage using an external aerial was also equivalent. However, significant issues were identified with handheld coverage. The extensive problems with CDMA Wireless Local Loop and Telstra's recommended migration to Next G Wireless Link were also noted as a particular concern. The ACMA findings, combined with feedback from the National Farmers' Federation (including the Association's survey data) led Senator Conroy to announce 18 January 2008 that the proposed switch-off of the CDMA network would be postponed.
- Telstra has been asked to provide advice to the Minister by 1 February 2008 how they will address the issues that have been identified in the ACMA report (a copy of the ACMA report can be found here- *CDMA-Next G Coverage Equivalence*), as well as the rectifications to enable him to reconsider the matter. Telstra has indicated that this can be done by 28 April 2008.
- NSW Farmers Association has also 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 by April 2008.

## Course of Action for Taking Up Next G Issues with Telstra

- Telstra has been actively contacting Association members who responded to the survey and ticked 'yes' to the Association providing contact details to Telstra.
- In order to take up an issue relating to individual Next G coverage and service concerns, the Association suggests:
  - Contacting Telstra via the dedicated Next G support line on freecall 1800 888 888;
  - Ringing your local Farm Communications Representative (Association members only) on freecall 1800 009 679; or
  - Contacting the Telecommunications Industry Ombudsman on freecall 1800 062 058 if unhappy with the response provided by Telstra.

## Key Contacts

- ① Telstra's Next G Issues Hotline (launched 21 January 2008) – freecall 1800 888 888
- ① Telstra's *Black Spots Bright Spots* line – phone 125 111
- ① Federal Government's Next G Customer Support Unit – freecall 1800 883 488
- ① NSW Farmers Association's Farm Communication Representatives – freecall 1800 009 679 (members only)
- ① Telecommunications Industry Ombudsman – freecall 1800 062 058