2025 Communications Federal Conference Report

Sally Brindal - WA

The Communications Portfolio continues to remain a focus and dedicated effort for Federal Council to guarantee existing communication services are maintained. New technologies and enhancements to existing technology are providing the opportunity for improvements to rural and remote connectivity however, it is important that these improvements continue to provide rural and remote students and their families with adequate communications services commensurate to their needs and that existing communication services are maintained.

ICPA (Aust) continues to engage with key communications stakeholders. This ensures we are able to raise both ongoing and more time-sensitive topics and issues. ICPA (Aust) remains active in the Rural, Regional and Remote Communications Coalition (RRRCC), Telecommunications Industry Ombudsman (TIO) Consumer Panel, Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA) Consumer Consultative Forum and Australian Communications Consumer Action Network (ACCAN), where we have the opportunity to raise members' issues. ICPA (Aust) also participates in regular meetings with NBN Co and Telstra, including Telstra Regional Forums with community group representatives from across regional Australia. ICPA (Aust) also engage with the Regional Tech Hub (RTH) on a regular basis, and we are able to assist members with communications needs through this channel. The introduction of RTH Regional Partnership Officers in each state and territory has boosted the awareness of the Regional Tech Hub and the valuable services they offer.

TELEPHONE

In rural and remote areas, landline telephone connections remain a significant and essential part of the communications services relied on by residents. Understandably, at the 2024 Conference, ICPA members again requested for services to be reliable, fit for purpose and maintained at a fully functioning standard.

ICPA (Aust) also sought reassurance that the USG be maintained to ensure rural and remote customers are not left without adequate communications due to stringent repair timeframes not being upheld and that any new Universal Service Obligation (USO) voice service exceeds the reliability and quality of existing voice services.

Our correspondence from Minister Rowland reiterated that Telstra has regulatory and contractual obligations to provide fixed phone services, nationally. Furthermore, Telstra is generally required to provide USO (Universal Service Obligation) voice services using pre-existing copper connections. However, not all premises will have previously had a copper connection that can be re-used, or the connection may have degraded. In these cases, Telstra would still need to provide a USO voice service using an alternative technology.

The USO applies nationwide, but for regional areas, Telstra is required to report publicly each quarter against a number of key indicators and provides performance details to the Department and the Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA). These data reporting requirements include service availability, connection timeframes, faults and outages, repair timeframes and appointment timeframes at the exchange service area level. It also provides national complaint and customer contact handling data. Quarterly reports can be downloaded from Telstra's [Regional Service Performance page](#).

Telstra has guaranteed repair periods specified by the Telecommunications (Customer Service Guarantee) Standard 2023 (CSG), which is the end of three business days from date of report. Some members are reporting being offered a Next G Wireless Link or 4G Fixed Wireless Service instead of having their landline repaired. However, unlike a landline, this service requires standard power to operate, and mobile coverage. If there are any cases where the CSG is not being fulfilled or if members are being pushed into an alternative service, ICPA (Aust) is interested in receiving your information.

MOBILE COVERAGE/SERVICE

3G Closure

Following the 2024 Federal Conference, ICPA (Aust) wrote to the Hon Michelle Rowland MP, Minister for Communications, citing concerns regarding the impact the closure of the 3G network may have on rural and remote families, and what procedures are in place should the transition to 4G not provide the 'equivalent or better coverage'.

It was quite evident from the Minister's response that the Government was relying on the public statements by both Telstra and Optus that there will be no loss of coverage following the 3G network switch off together with other rhetoric regarding published coverage areas and independent testing.

Well, 3G is now gone and as we all know, it certainly has not provided an 'equivalent or better coverage' for a number of consumers. Since the closure of the 3G network a constant theme amongst all communication stakeholders has been the lack of mobile network coverage and call quality. Members have reported, and continue to report, a lack of 4G coverage where there previously was 3G coverage and call dropouts in existing 4G areas. These concerns are continually raised with Telstra at a federal level and with the Minister for Communications.

On 17 December 2024, the Government held the '3G switch off lessons learned roundtable' with the telecommunications industry; 4G case studies detailing issues were provided by ICPA (Aust) to the Minister for Communications Senior Advisor, Matt Healy. More recently cases studies were also forwarded to ACCAN (Australian Communications Consumer Action Network) at the request of the Communications Minister seeking information on consumer experiences of the 3G shutdown.

Telstra have a 3G Helpline to further support customers who need more help with the transition. Telstra will work with customers 1:1 to troubleshoot their issues. For some, this may be quite straight forward with device setting updates, upgrading to a blue tick device or installing a go repeater. For others, it may require escalating it to their colleagues to better understand what the network experience is in that specific location so we can provide advice.

Key information:

- Customers can call 1800 990 853 between 8am to 7pm Monday to Friday AEDT

- Different device types and the diversity of Australia's landscape mean that each customer's experience is unique, which is why we want to work directly with each customer to help troubleshoot

- The helpline is staffed by a team of agents with deep knowledge on the transition to help troubleshoot why mobile experience may have changed

- Telstra.com/3Gclosure is our main hub with guidance for customers to self-serve some of the basic troubleshooting

Telstra have not put a timeframe on how long the helpline will operate for. They will continue to review the volume and types of calls and make their decision on longevity as we progress. Telstra encourages all members to call the hotline if they continue to experience issues as a result of the 3G shutdown.

Telstra offer the following steps you can take to get the best out of 4G and 5G coverage.

Always update your phone's software. Check your software is updated and network settings are correct, then set your network to automatic. **TIP**: to make sure you have the latest software update, power cycle your phone by turning it off for a few minutes and then turning it back on. This forces the phone to refresh its network settings and will bring up the latest software update available.

2. In a regional, rural or remote area? For optimal coverage, Telstra recommend a Bluetick device. You can also consider getting coverage extension devices for home or on the road.

3. Ensure your Telstra Go Repeater or Cel-Fi Go is set up for 4G. Make sure it's configured correctly to boost 4G signal.

4. Check your location on Telstra coverage maps. Telstra 4G coverage is equivalent to sites previously covered by 3G on our maps but remember that these maps are a guide only.

Remember, fewer bars of coverage on your new phone does not mean less service – there are no 4G standards for signal bars.

Preparedness Activities

Telstra have released a helpful resource to help Australians prepare ahead the disaster seasons. Preparedness activities and the initiatives available to help communities respond and recover when the worst happens include:

- **Extra data**: Postpaid mobile customers that are impacted in disaster-affected areas will automatically receive 100GB of extra data. Prepaid customers are eligible for 70GB of extra data that can be activated by SMS.

- **Upgraded payphones**: Telstra have updated almost 800 of the 1,000 payphones they are committed to delivering in disaster-prone areas by mid-2025. These upgrades provide free Telstra Wi-Fi, USB charging for devices, and backup power.

- **Telstra Response Team**: Telstra's team of technicians will be on the ground to restore connectivity and provide emergency services as soon as it is safe to do so when disaster strikes. At the same time, trained disaster assistance agents are available 24/7 to take calls and provide bill relief and other support. You can reach them on 1800 888 888.

- **Prepping temporary connectivity**: From their mobile Cell-On-Wheels (COWS), to deploying many more portable satellite kits to Telstra's teams in the field, they are getting equipment ready to help provide temporary Wi-Fi connectivity at priority locations if required when infrastructure is impacted.

- **Network inspections and maintenance**: Telstra are clearing vegetation and maintaining fire breaks at nearly 8,000 sites around the country. They have conducted hundreds of site inspections in cyclone risk areas and tested backup power supplies, including checking or replacing thousands of batteries.

ARE YOU E-PREPARED FOR A NATURAL DISASTER?

Summer in Australia brings natural disasters and emergency situations. Telstra has partnered with Justice Connected to develop a free online training tool that provides a simple guide to identifying your personal documents and how to store them safely.

Learn how to e-prepare for a natural disaster.

Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport References Committee (RRAT)

The Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport References Committee, chaired by Senator Matt Canavan, undertook a Senate enquiry into the shutdown of the 3G mobile network and have made three recommendations of particular interest is Recommendation 1.

Recommendation 1*:*

The committee recommends that the Australian Government establish a program to help customers that have lost mobile phone coverage since the 3G shutoff. This program should be co-funded between industry and government and be for the purpose of purchasing connectivity equipment for use by residents in rural and remote areas. For example, subsidies could be provided to purchase:

- *boosters for buildings and vehicles.*

- *Starlink or other low-earth orbit satellite equipment, including access to mobile phone by Starlink services; and*

- *replacements for equipment rendered obsolete by the 3G shutdown.*

This aligns with a motion carried at the 2024 Federal Conference. Given that most people are already addressing 3G coverage issues at their own expense I am not sure that the Government will instigate a program of reimbursement. However, technologies will continue to change so I will log this recommendation for future reference.

In April 2025, Federal President Louise Martin and I joined representatives from key regional, rural and remote groups and the Telstra Regional Council in Melbourne, for a Telstra Regional Workshop. The workshop focussed on three sessions led by presentations from key Telstra executives including:

- Understanding the regional, rural and remote customer needs, expectations and challenges in regional connectivity, plus reflections on the recent 3G transition.

- Regional network resiliency and reliability, with a specific emphasis around power and energy.

- Empowering new regional technology for regional and remote communities, including the evolving policy landscape to enable these technology developments.

The workshop concluded with a Q&A session involving CEO, Vicky Brady where Vicky discussed a wide range of topics from stakeholders, from geopolitical risks to cost of living pressures and affordability for vulnerable customers.

The desired outcome was for Telstra to continue to hear directly the opportunities, issues and challenges faced in regional and remote Australia; to improve shared knowledge around regional telecommunications and Telstra's connectivity roadmap; to foster relationships so that we can better collaborate together.

Mobile connectivity topics continued to be consistently raised in a variety of forums with reliability of coverage and backup power constantly on the agenda. Telstra is keenly aware of these concerns and continue to expand their resiliency programs and emergency response for the mobile network. Federal Government funding grants are providing some assistance in meeting the necessary infrastructure improvements to meet these requirements: Better Connectivity Plan for Regional and Rural Australia | Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development, Communications and the Arts

Improving Mobile Coverage Round (IMCR)

Stage 1 provided grants totalling $37.2 million to deliver improved mobile coverage and quality of service to 42 target locations. Stage 1 of the IMCR was audited by the Australian National Audit Office during 2023-24 and the department was found to be largely effective in the design and award of funding.

Stage 2 of the IMCR closed for applications on 25 September 2025; up to $3.047 million is available but only to fund solutions to implement the Government's commitments to improve mobile coverage and quality of service at the two target locations of Majors Creek, NSW, and Mangrove Mountain, NSW.

Mobile Black Spot Program (MBSP)

Rounds 1-7; the Government's commitment has generated more the $1 billion to deliver 1400 new mobile base stations across Australia. This has also been supported by co-contributions from a range of third parties including local and state governments, and telecommunications industry grantees that are Mobile Network Operators (Telstra, Optus, TPG – formerly Vodafone), and Mobile Network Infrastructure Providers (Field Solutions Group and One WIFI). Round 7 of the MBSP was a combined grant opportunity with Round 3 of the Regional Connectivity Program (RCP) but further rounds of the RCP have not been announced since 2023.

A list of the funded MBSP locations can be found here: Mobile Black Spot Program Round 7 – Funded Solution List – December 2023 | Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development, Communications and the Arts

Funding for new rounds of the MSBP was provided in the Better Connectivity Plan for Regional and Rural Australia, through the 2022–23 Budget.

Round 8 opened for applications on 17 December 2024 and closed 30 April 2025. The Government is providing up to $55 million which will co-fund projects to provide new resilient mobile coverage in regional and remote areas of Australia that are prone to natural disasters, including bushfires, cyclones and floods. The focus on areas impacted by, or at risk of, natural disasters reflects the increasing exposure of many regions to these events, and the need for communities to access resilient mobile communications services during and after these events.

Applications for funding under Round 8 were open to Mobile Network Operators and Mobile Network Infrastructure Providers. Applicants were strongly encouraged to consult with state, territory and local governments, and local communities on proposed solutions, including referring to the Round 8 Project Noticeboard.

A Project Noticeboard for Round 8 was established for local governments and state, territory and federal parliamentarians to identify potential projects or locations which would benefit from new and improved mobile coverage. Industry applicants were encouraged to consider the proposed projects and locations on the Project Noticeboard when developing their applications.

The Noticeboard closed on 7 February 2025, to allow industry applicants time to consider the submissions and to engage with other applicants on the development of proposals.

Mobile Network Hardening Program (MNHP)

Current mobile services need to have sufficient backup power to provide consistent and uninterrupted delivery, where the education of children is reliant on mobile coverage, in addition to maintenance, upgrade and improvement of mobile coverage concerns.

The Mobile Network Hardening Program is an Australian Government initiative funding upgrades to improve the resilience of Australia's mobile network telecommunications infrastructure in regional, rural and remote Australia to:

- prevent outages during a natural disaster

- strengthen the resilience of telecommunications facilities to allow them to operate for longer during natural disasters

- support the rapid restoration of services following an outage.

Round 1 provided $23.5 million in grant funding to Optus, Telstra and TPG to deliver approximately 1000 projects to strengthen the resilience of regional telecommunications infrastructure. The first stage is funding the enhancement of the battery backup power to at least 12 hours at 467 base stations funded under the first two rounds of the MBSP. The second stage is funding the delivery of over 532 resilience upgrades at mobile base stations including:

- the deployment of new portable and permanent generators to supply additional back-up power during power outages

- upgrading battery systems to increase back-up power capacity

- adding battery extension devices to enhance existing back-up power capacity at key sites within mobile networks

- improving transmission resilience within regional mobile network clusters to reduce single points of network failure

- physical hardening of sites against bushfire damage.

As of 30 June 2024, 91% of Round 1 projects have been completed, with the remaining schedules for early 2025.

Round 2 is providing $14.2 million in grant funding for 386 projects to strengthen the resilience of regional telecommunications infrastructure, across regional Australia.

Grant funding is being provided to:

- CiFi to improve back-up power capacity and strengthen network resilience on Christmas Island and Norfolk Island

- Optus to install new generators and improve transmission resilience in clusters of connected base stations to reduce single points of failure

- Telstra to uplift battery back-up power reserves at sites in remote Australia, providing continuity of service during outages and other emergencies, and

- Indara for 2 Disaster Recovery Skids for deployment across regional NSW, Victoria and Tasmania to restore mobile services during and after a natural disaster.

The full list of projects being funded can be found here: Mobile Network Hardening Program—Round 2 funded sites (infrastructure.gov.au)

The Better Connectivity Plan for Regional and Rural Australia is providing funding for a further round of the Program.

Round 3 of the program closed for applications on 20th December 2024. The Government is providing up to $20 million (GST exclusive) for Round 3, which will fund mobile telecommunications Resilience Upgrades in areas impacted by, or at risk of, Natural Disasters in:

- regional and remote Australia, and

- the peri-urban fringe of 19 capital and major regional cities.

Round 3 will be delivered in two streams:

- a $10 million (GST exclusive) 'Regional and Remote Australia' stream for projects that deliver Resilience Upgrades in regional, remote and very remote Australia, including First Nations communities; and

- a $10 million (GST exclusive) 'Peri-Urban Fringe' stream for projects that deliver Resilience Upgrades in the peri-urban fringe of 19 capital and major regional cities (consistent with Round 2 of the Peri-Urban Mobile Program).

Better Connectivity Plan for Regional and Rural Australia

The Better Connectivity is providing more than $1.1 billion to rural and regional communities. This commitment forms part of the Government's investment of more than $2.2 billion in regional communications.

The Plan includes $656 million provided in the 2022–23 October Budget over five years to improve mobile and broadband connectivity and resilience in rural and regional Australia. Initial funding allocations under the Plan include:

- $400 million to boost multi-carrier mobile coverage on regional roads, improve mobile coverage in under-served regional and remote communities, and increase the resilience of communications services and public safety communications facilities (including through the Broadcasting Resilience Program, Telecommunications Disaster Resilience Innovation Program, Mobile Black Spot Program, Mobile Network Hardening Program and Regional Roads Australia Mobile Program);

- $200 million for two additional rounds of the Regional Connectivity Program to invest in place-based digital connectivity infrastructure projects in regional communities;

- $30 million for on-farm connectivity, so farmers can take advantage of connected machinery and sensor technology;

- $20 million to conduct an independent audit of mobile coverage to better identify black spots and guide investment priorities; and

- $6 million to boost funding for the [Regional Tech Hub](), which supports regional consumers to access advice and support on digital connectivity options.

The Plan also includes the $480 million already provided to NBN Co through the NBN Fixed Wireless and Satellite Upgrade Program. This investment is upgrading 120,000 satellite premises to Fixed Wireless, and boosting the Fixed Wireless network by enabling speeds of up to 100 Mbps for all premises in the expanded Fixed Wireless footprint, and up to 250 Mbps for 85% of Fixed Wireless premises. This upgrade is also delivering important benefits to NBN satellite services by relieving satellite capacity.

The Broadcasting Resilience Program (BRP):

$20 million over 3 years from FY2022–23 to BAI Communications to improve the resilience of 98 ABC AM and FM broadcast sites across Australia. The sites that will be upgraded as part of the program:

- are used for priority emergency broadcasting during natural disasters

- have no or at-risk backup power to run their transmission facilities if the power is disrupted

- are at greater risk of failure due to being in a bushfire area or other natural disaster.

The Telecommunications Disaster Resilience Innovation (TDRI):

Promotes the development of new technologies to provide solutions for telecommunications disaster resilience, particularly in our regional, remote and First Nations communities.

Funding has been awarded to 33 projects under the TDRI program's 2 streams:

- 18 projects received funding under the Power Resilience Round. This round funded solutions that strengthen the resilience of telecommunications against the impacts of power outages—the leading cause of telecommunications outages during natural disasters.

- 15 projects received funding under the Innovation Round. This round funded innovative telecommunications solutions to improve the resiliency, redundancy and availability of telecommunications during and/or following a natural disaster.

Peri-Urban Mobile Program (PUMP)

PUMP is a grants program that provides funding to improve mobile connectivity in bushfire and other natural disaster-prone areas along the edges of Australia's major cities. The program targets long standing mobile coverage and reception issues in the peri-urban fringes of Australia's major cities. The peri-urban fringe is where the bush meets the edges of the suburbs, creating natural disaster risks for those living and working in those areas. These areas have been historically underserved because of the high cost of deploying infrastructure, difficult terrain, planning challenges and lower population densities.

PUMP complements the MBSP. Round 1 is providing $28.2 million (GST inclusive) in funding to Optus, Telstra and TPG to deliver 66 4G and 5G mobile base stations at [50 sites on the peri-urban fringe of Australia's major cities](). Round 2 awarded $40.9 million in funding to 47 new mobile solutions across Australia. These mobile solutions attracted more than $43 million (GST inclusive) in co-contributions from the telco industry and the Queensland Government.

As a result of the number of high-quality proposals submitted by industry, which fully met the round's assessment criteria and represented value with relevant money to the Commonwealth, the department recommended that funding earmarked for a future round be brought forward to support a larger number of mobile solutions under Round 2. The government accepted this recommendation which increased the

number of solutions announced under the round and means more communities will benefit from these projects sooner.

The Regional Roads Australia Mobile Program (RRAMP)

A government initiative to improve multi-carrier mobile coverage on highways and major roads in regional and remote Australia. The National RRAMP is expected to open for applications in the second half of 2025 and will provide grant funding for projects which boost multi-carrier mobile coverage on regional and remote highways and major roads.

National Audit of Mobile Coverage

The aim is to better identify mobile coverage black spots across Australia to help target future investment and to provide an independent resource that better reflects on ground experiences of mobile coverage provided commercially by mobile providers.

The Audit commenced in May 2024 with a pilot, covering 3 roads and 3 locations in each state and territory and will run until 30 June 2027.

The main Audit is currently underway, and involves drive testing around 180,000 km of regional and rural roads every year for 3 years. Drive-testing is being conducted by Accenture and Australia Post. Devices will also be placed in up to 77 locations, mostly post offices, across all states and territories to conduct testing over an extended period over the 3 years. This will assist in identifying seasonal variations in mobile coverage.

Map of Audit Roads and Locations

The map displays roads and locations proposed to be audited and may be subject to change. Queries related to the National Audit of Mobile Coverage can be sent to mobileaudit@infrastructure.gov.au.

The Audit will measure coverage and performance across Optus, Telstra and TPG 4G and 5G services (it also covered 3G while it was available).

Crowd-sourced data and data collected from drive testing and static locations are updated regularly and available to the public via the Mobile Audit Visualisation Tool. The data and coverage maps presented are compiled through community input and field testing, capturing real-world user experiences at given moments in time.

Crowd-sourced data is collected via the Accenture Crowdsourcing platform and draws upon about 160,000 active users in Australia at any one time contributing to 3.5 billion samples annually.

Pilot Programs

The Australian Government is providing $50 million nationally to state and territory governments to fund pilot programs with the States and Territories that trial new, innovative and novel solutions which increase mobile telecommunications coverage along roads and highways in their jurisdiction. The pilot programs also allow each state and territory to tailor solutions that meet their own needs and priorities.

 The pilot programs are testing new ways of:

- approaching the market to deliver solutions.

- identifying roads based on data, need and local priorities; and

- encouraging the market to identify new technology, power, backhaul and connectivity solutions

Multi-carrier coverage will also be prioritised to improve consumer choice and access. Participating States and Territories are expected to contribute to their pilot program, either through partner funding or an in-kind contribution, including fast tracking access to Government controlled land or provision of project and contract management services.

Improved Services

The value of ICPA (Aust) was clearly demonstrated by the Kindon Branch motion that was carried at the 2024 Conference. In attendance was Lyndall Stoyles, Telstra Group General Counsel & Group Executive Sustainability, External Affairs & Legal (SEAL) who took a particular interest in this motion which has resulted in a positive outcome, not just for Kindon State School but also other schools within Queensland. Telstra has been partnering with the Department of Education (DoE) to deliver an uplift of bandwidth to schools throughout Queensland including Kindon State School. In some instances, Telstra continued to work with the DoE to augment existing services to boost the current data network experience to ensure each school can continue to deliver quality educational outcomes.

Telstra worked with the DoE Enterprise Technology Services Project Team to upgrade existing services to the impacted schools below including, for example, via the installation of Telstra's Enterprise Grade Starlink service. These services were ready for students to return in Term 4, 2024 or early at the start of term:

- o Kindon State School

- o Bymount East State School

- o Grosmont State School – Telstra has been advised by the DoE in QLD that this school does not currently have enrolled students. As a result, Telstra will perform technology upgrades at a time advised by the DoE

- o Wyandra State School

ICPA (Aust) contacted the Minister for Communications and Telstra to ensure that when major network disruptions occur in rural and remote areas for more than 24 hours, Telstra supplies an alternative temporary network to the affected town or area to minimise disruption to students' education.

Telstra's response was that while the vast majority of outages are resolved within a day or two, it is not practical or possible for them to link the development of a temporary solution to the duration of an outage alone — the travel time to site may exceed the expected restoration time, and/or there may be competing demands for deployable assets in other locations. Telstra claim they focus on restoring services as soon as possible and strive to support their customers.

Scams

SMS Sender ID Register Legislation Goes Before Parliament

Legislation to establish an SMS Sender ID Register was introduced to Parliament by Minister for Communications Michelle Rowland and the Sender ID Register Bill has now passed Federal Parliament. The proposed Register aims to reduce the number of scams and help consumers identify legitimate texts from fraudulent ones. It is an important tool to combat SMS scams consumers frequently experience. The ACMA will now move to establish and operate a Register. All industry participants need to do their part.

The Federal Government's planned SMS Sender ID Register will be mandatory rather than voluntary. This comes after a government trial of a voluntary register and consistent pressure from ACCAN and the

consumer sector to create a mandatory Register. 89% of respondents to consultation expressed a preference for a mandatory model. The Register will help to drive down the number of scam SMS' Australians receive. Australians are frequently bombarded by scam texts – and from international experience (Singapore) that a mandatory Register will make a difference.

INTERNET ACCESS

Members continue to raise the necessity for adequate internet access commensurate to the educational needs of geographically isolated students. Despite rapid growth and enhancements in rural and remote internet connectivity ICPA (Aust) is aware there are still challenges for our members. It is also prudent to ensure that despite these improvements ICPA (Aust) continues to advocate for services to be maintained and enhanced. ICPA (Aust) encourages members to raise their specific connectivity challenges and requirements via case studies to be presented to the Federal Government and other stakeholders to ensure that issues can be resolved, and future developments are directed to areas with maximum advantage for educational access.

Following the 2024 Federal Conference, ICPA (Aust) wrote to the Hon Michelle Rowland MP, Minister for Communications, citing all motions carried at the conference, underpinned by an overall request that adequate internet access is available for all rural and remote students with regards to speed, quality, capabilities and cost of the services

Correspondence received acknowledged that access to reliable communications is an essential service and understanding there can be significant technological challenges and opportunities in maintaining connectivity in regional communities. The Minister referred to the Government's $480 million to improve both mobile and broadband coverage across Australia.

In correspondence, the Minister made reference to the improvements to the Sky Muster Plus Premium Plans and the School Student Broadband Initiative (SSBI) which is providing a free nbn internet service to 30,000 eligible families until December 2028. The Government has also committed to funding free Community Wi-Fi in over twenty remote communities around Australia.

The nbn Fixed Wireless (FW) upgrade, as part of the $750 million Fixed Wireless and Satellite Upgrade program in now complete ($480 million from the Australian Government and $270 million from nbn). This means around 800,000 homes and businesses in regional, rural and remote Australia can now access higher speeds with a Fixed Wireless connection. Some of these customers were previously only able to access a satellite connection and the transition to a FW connection is helping to maintain a lack of congestion on the satellite network as data demands increase.

Key benefits for those in regional and remote Australia include:

- **Faster speeds:** Around 800,000 homes and businesses can now enjoy faster speeds, including during busy periods.

- **New high-speed plans:** Two new high-speed tier plans are now available via participating retail service providers, offering peak wholesale nbn network download speeds of up to five times faster than what was previously available:

  - FW Home Fast: 200-250 / 8-20 mbps to approx. 90% of coverage area by end of upgrade

  - FW Super Fast: 400/10-40 mbps to approx. 80% of coverage area

- **Expanded access:** More than 120,000 homes and businesses previously within the nbn Sky Muster satellite service footprint now have access to nbn Fixed Wireless for the first time.

- **Enhanced performance:** Improved network performance for uncapped data plans under nbn Sky Muster Plus. Satellite network slower speeds during busy periods has been resolved.

Sky Muster Plus capped data plans that required a data allowance for video streaming and VPN use between 4pm and midnight were discontinued from 1st March 2025 with consumers automatically migrated to a nbn Sky Muster Plus Premium plan.

Nbn have been increasing awareness about FW availability through their "Check Your Address journey. To learn about your nbn connection status and more click on the following link. Check your address | nbn

The School Student Broadband Initiative (SSBI) launched in February 2023, to provide free home internet for up to 30,000 unconnected families with school aged students, had been extended until the end of December 2028. The announcement was made mid-Jan as part of 'Government Back to School'. Families had until December 2028 to sign up, but the capacity had been reached by May 2025 and no new sign-up applications are being received.

ICPA (Aust) has continuously maintained its advocacy with the Federal Government and NBN Co for affordable portable internet products for the delivery of education to students from transient working families in remote locations of Australia. The availability of LEOSat technology and other transportable options have assisted in providing a solution to this problem for some, however no subsidy currently exists to assist families with the associated significant costs of these services.

 In response to the introduction of LEOSat technology, Gavin Williams confirmed nbn released a closed RFI (request for information) last year to further understand the offerings of various low earth orbit satellite providers, including the advantages and challenges of different LEO constellations. This is their first step in examining how to best meet the needs of people who live and work in their present satellite footprint. They are continuing to work on this endeavour and can confirm that the principles outlined in 2024 Federal Conference motions feature in their thinking.

The Minister has confirmed that NBN Co has received responses to its closed RFI from several suppliers and is currently undergoing a detailed analysis and evaluation of these responses. The process is still ongoing, and the Government is engaging with NBN Co throughout this process and fully supports the thorough consideration of this opportunity.

Additionally, the Australian Government has established a Low Earth Orbit Satellite Working Group to consider the range of issues and opportunities related to LEOSats and hybrid solutions. Consideration for all options includes how best to meet the safety, security, sovereignty and sustainability needs of all Australians, ensuring the regulatory and policy settings are fit-for-purpose so these new technologies can be easily adopted.

The Government has announced a significant trial of fixed voice and Low Earth Orbit Satellite (LEOSat) connectivity. This is a notable step forward for consumers, particularly in regional areas. With direct to handset connectivity anticipated to provide mobile phones with voice and text capabilities in the future, these trials may inform future universal service policies. As part of the trials, the reliability and quality of voice calls will be tracked and impacts of weather conditions on services will be tested.

Emerging developments in technologies associated with LEOSats is providing opportunities to enhance rural and remote communications and provide increased choice and opportunities for ICPA members, both in the area of telephony and internet. Federal Council will continue to raise awareness of members' concerns and issues at every opportunity.

REGIONAL TELECOMMUNICATIONS INDEPENDENT REVIEW COMMITTEE (RTIRC) 2024

The Review occurs every 3 years and is an opportunity to examine the existing and future telecommunications needs in regional, rural and remote communities across Australia. The Regional Telecommunications Independent Review Committee has delivered its report to the Australian Government, informed by extensive consultation with people living and working in regional, rural and remote parts of Australia, sharing their views and experiences with connectivity.

The 2024 Regional Telecommunications Review 'Connecting communities, reaching every region' report and recommendations, are available in the following formats:

- Connecting Communities, reaching every region (PDF)

- Connecting Communities, reaching every region (DOCX)

- Extract of the 2024 Recommendations (PDF)

ICPA (Aust) made a submission to the review, but I must confess I have not read the whole **119-page** report! There were, however, 14 recommendations that can be summarised as follows:

1. **Upscaling connectivity literacy**

The Committee recommends a significant increase in the focus and resources for connectivity literacy in regional, rural and remote Australia.

The Australian Government should:

- develop a program to create Connectivity Champions

- develop high-quality connectivity literacy training programs to train Connectivity Champions, communities, businesses and other stakeholders

- refocus the Regional Tech Hub and increase funding to expand its capacity, boost awareness of its services, and improve its performance in providing existing core services

- review the Regional Tech Hub's scope, strategy and governance at the end of its current contract period.

2. **Improving the mobile experience**

The Committee recommends actions to improve mobile services, including addressing diminishing mobile experience in existing regional, rural and remote coverage areas.

The Australian Government should:

- prioritise funding to improve existing terrestrial mobile network capacity, service quality, and resilience, rather than further extending terrestrial coverage

- continue funding new terrestrial mobile coverage for critical areas like roads, and leverage strategically located Wi-Fi hotspots where needed

- request the ACCC to conduct a new inquiry into mandatory domestic mobile roaming, considering emerging DTH (direct to handset) satellite technologies and its effect on competition

- mandate, at the earliest opportunity, emergency mobile roaming during disasters and expedite the regulatory and operational framework for its use

- increase consumer and business awareness of terrestrial mobile network alternatives like Wi-Fi calling and Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) services for fixed locations

- enhance the ACMA's resources to enforce compliance against the sale and use of illegal mobile phone boosters and other unauthorised equipment and installation practices.

3.   **Expedite universal service modernisation**

The Committee recommends the Australian Government expedite modernising the USO and the Statutory Infrastructure Provider (SIP) regime by merging them into a unified service obligation. NBN Co, as the provider of last resort, and other SIP operators would be required to provide voice-capable broadband services with minimum speeds and standards for all premises.

The Committee also notes that continued public ownership of NBN Co will be crucial to ensure that service standards are met under a modernised USO in regional, rural and remote Australia. The contractual Copper Continuity Obligation (CCO) should be phased out where and when proven and effective voice-capable broadband services are available.

The Committee further recommends:

- NBN Co be tasked and funded to implement, in consultation with industry stakeholders, a plan to manage the needs of different cohorts of regional, rural and remote users

- the modernised USO be technology-neutral

- the modernised USO be flexible, ensuring that minimum speeds, quality and other standards are readily adaptable, so they remain relevant to changing needs

- premises without terrestrial mobile coverage have access to an affordable secondary redundant broadband service including optional battery backup, with government contributions as necessary

- when a modernised USO is introduced, the Customer Service Guarantee (CSG) is updated and strengthened to provide appropriate protections for regional, rural, and remote consumers

- public phones (payphones) be embedded as a free service for domestic calls. Once current contractual obligations expire, the Australian Government should consider tendering for a provider to operate public phone services.

4.   **Consumer protection**

The Committee:

- recommends a full review of consumer protections and service standards to consolidate and strengthen protections contained in a multitude of legislative instruments

- supports the ongoing TCP Code review with a focus on strengthening enforceable consumer protections, in particular, ensuring commission-based sales incentives do not undermine the fair treatment of vulnerable consumers.

5.   **Affordability**

The Committee recommends:

- the introduction of pre-paid, low-cost broadband plans in remote First Nations communities, as proposed by the First Nations Digital Inclusion Advisory Group

- the Australian Government facilitate extending these options, promoting affordability and access for all regional, rural and remote Australians

- developing an initiative for unmetered access to critical government websites for users on limited data plans

- ongoing availability and funding for the School Student Broadband Initiative (SSBI) to ensure all school-aged children have access to broadband internet, along with initiatives to increase awareness of the program in regional, rural and remote Australia.

6. **Develop a national telecommunications data platform**

The Committee recommends the Australian Government establish a national telecommunications data platform. Managed by the ACMA or the ACCC, the national platform should include:

- For consumers: an interactive online tool that allows consumers to easily access detailed information on broadband and mobile service availability in their area, helping them make informed decisions about their connectivity options across Australia.

- For the restricted use of Australian and state and territory governments: information about the location of telecommunications infrastructure assets for the purpose of investment and emergency planning and response.

Telecommunications providers should be required to supply data to governments in standardised formats to enable comparisons between locations and providers. This will enhance transparency in broadband and mobile coverage and help guide infrastructure investments, especially in underserved rural and remote areas.

The Committee further recommends that the Measuring Broadband Australia (MBA) program is continued beyond its current contract enabling the ACCC to monitor service performance.

7. **Regional telecommunications strategy**

The Committee recommends that the Australian Government develop a regional, rural and remote connectivity strategy. The strategy should be a vision for regional telecommunications and guide future investment and the regulatory environment for the future.

8. **Modernising government programs**

The Committee recommends that rigorous evaluations of the Australian Government's current rounds of telecommunications investment programs be conducted to ensure public investment is well targeted and delivered effectively. Further, the Government should ensure that future rounds of existing and new programs, are fit for purpose by:

- considering technology developments, such as LEO satellites and DTH capabilities

- mandating meaningful community engagement throughout each project phase, with special emphasis on First Nations communities both as title holders and consumers

- prioritising competitive retail and infrastructure options where viable

- addressing connectivity literacy and affordability

- enhancing resilience and capacity

- recognising the value of cross-government collaboration and planning.

To increase transparency, the Government should create a public website to track milestones for all funded telecommunications projects. This platform would keep regional, rural and remote communities informed about infrastructure rollouts by providing regular updates on timelines, potential delays, and their causes, thereby building trust and awareness of government efforts to improve connectivity.

9. **Support for the First Nations Digital Inclusion Advisory Group**

Recognising the value of the work of the First Nations Digital Inclusion Advisory Group, the Committee recommends that it be continued as a standing initiative. Consideration should be given to adopting relevant First Nations Digital Inclusion Advisory Group recommendations across regional, rural and remote communities to address the digital divide.

10. **Embedding community Wi-Fi**

The Committee recommends that the Australian Government:

- continue funding contributions for existing Strengthening Telecommunications Against Natural Disasters (STAND) facilities

- invest in new community connectivity hubs to provide community Wi-Fi services during emergencies and natural disasters

- expand investment in mesh Wi-Fi networks in remote First Nations Communities allowing a choice from a tailored menu of connectivity options that best meet local needs and noting that communities without mobile coverage should be prioritised

- invest in and promote free public Wi-Fi initiatives in key locations across regional, rural and remote Australia.

11. **Transition oversight**

The Committee recommends comprehensive independent monitoring and public reporting during large-scale telecommunications transitions, such as mobile technology switch offs and the migrations required for modernising the USO. The ACMA could be well-placed to perform this role.

12. **Expedite planning approval**

The Committee recommends that the Australian Government should exercise its power to expedite planning approvals for large telecommunications infrastructure projects, such as tower installations in regional, rural and remote Australia and in instances where Australian Government funding has contributed to projects.

13. **Powering connectivity**

The Committee recommends that regulation be introduced to require:

- minimum backup power periods for new critical telecommunications infrastructure installations in regional, rural and remote Australia, with existing assets to be captured over time. The backup period would be regularly reviewed to take account of changes in storage and network technology

- energy providers to give high priority to restorations of power for critical telecommunications infrastructure in regional, rural and remote Australia

- energy providers to prioritise energy connections for new telecommunications installations.

14. **Evolution of Regional Telecommunications Independent Review Committees**

The Committee recommends replacing the current appointment of Regional Telecommunications Independent Review Committees every three years with a permanent Regional Telecommunications Commissioner or Regional Telecommunications Advisory Panel. Given the rapid pace of technology change, increasing complexity of the market and the need to modernise the USO, continuous oversight is required.

REGIONAL TECH HUB (RTH)

Our friends at the Regional Tech Hub have launched a podcast - Tech Hub Talk.

It is now available on all major podcast platforms!

Tech Hub Talk offers practical, easy-listening conversations hosted by Joshua Groch, featuring guest speakers discussing regional connectivity. The first season opens with a conversation about the 3G shutdown; why it was necessary and what you can do if you were caught off guard or are experiencing problems. Other episodes offer insights from various perspectives, including a bush connectivity advocate, a primary producer, and Telstra representatives and real-life stories of resilience, including handling natural disasters in remote areas and emergency preparedness.

Season One Episode Highlights:

- **Episode 1**: *3G Shutdown* – A discussion with Kristy Sparrow from BIRRR on the impacts and what it means for regional users.

- **Episode 2**: Insights from a primary producer on adapting to the change.

- **Episode 3**: Telstra's perspective on the shutdown and future improvements.

- **Episode 4**: A pastoralist's experience with natural disaster recovery in Far North QLD.

- **Episode 5**: Preparing for emergencies and insights from emergency response teams.

Keep an eye on their socials for episode updates!

The RTH is a federally funded government initiative offering free and independent advice to regional, rural and remote Australians to get connected, stay connected and improve their connection. The Regional Tech Hub offers independent advice and support, helping regional, rural, and remote Australians negotiate often confusing phone and internet options and technical issues. The team are all based regionally across Australia. Call them during the times below to speak to someone directly about your phone and internet options. Alternatively, complete the following options through their website:

- Book a time to speak with them through the 'Book an appointment' tab

- Ask for a free, customised Connectivity Report on your options

- Ask to progress an issue with your service provider using their Escalation Form

- Hotline/Live Chat Operating Hours (AEST/AEDT): Mon: 12pm – 5pm Tue: 12pm – 5pm Wed: 9am – 2pm Thu: 9am – 2pm Fri: 9am – 2pm

The RTH can be contacted at regionaltechhub.org.au or 1300 081 029.

LOW EARTH ORBIT (LEO) SATELLITE SERVICES

The Government has announced a significant trial of fixed voice and Low Earth Orbit Satellite (LEOSat) connectivity. This is a notable step forward for consumers, particularly in regional areas. With direct to handset connectivity anticipated to provide mobile phones with voice and text capabilities in the future, these trials may inform future universal service policies. As part of the trials, the reliability and quality of voice calls will be tracked and impacts of weather conditions on services will be tested.

Approximately 250,000 Australians use the service, a significant slice of global users.

As first reported by [CommsDay](#), Starlink has placed some Australian customers on waiting lists, citing limited capacity in certain areas of the country. Users in zones around Perth and Brisbane will have to wait for new capacity to come online before ordering and receiving their satellite dishes. ACCAN has confirmed this through [attempts on the Starlink website](#) to order the dishes to addresses in affected areas. PCMag reports that this is also occurring in parts of the US – a sign of the fast-growing popularity of the service.

UNIVERSAL OUTDOOR MOBILE OBLIGATION (UOMO)

Federal President Louise Martin and I attended the inaugural Comms Day Regional and Remote Forum in Canberra on 25 and 26 February 2025. ICPA (Aust) would like to thank nbn for sponsoring the cost of attendance. At the Forum the Minister for Communications, the Hon Michelle Rowland MP, addressed conference and provided more detail on the Government's recent announcement of the Universal Outdoor Mobile Obligation (UOMO) which has the expressed objective to facilitate competitive coverage. Additionally, that D2D (direct to device) SMS and voice obligations are to be implemented by late 2027. D2D will complement existing terrestrial networks, and current programs still have government commitment.

As is often the case there has been a number of different terms used for D2D: Satellite to Mobile (STM), Direct to Handset (DTH) or Direct to Cell (DTC); making understanding the technology confusing for consumers.

SATELLITE TO MOBILE (STM)

On 7 June, Telstra announced Satellite to Mobile messaging capability, Australia's first satellite to mobile text messaging product as part of its collaboration with SpaceX's Starlink Direct to Cell. The service is available for consumer and small business customers on Telstra month-to month mobile plans with a device from the Samsung Galaxy S25 series family and iPhone13, iPhone 14, iPhone 15 or iPhone 16 (all models). It is currently unavailable on Telstra Pre-Paid mobile plans.

Telstra Satellite to Mobile Tips

What you need

1. A **compatible device** - currently a iPhone 13, 14, 15 and 16 (all models) and Samsung Galaxy S25 series devices.
2. Up to date device **software**.
3. An **eligible Telstra plan** - Consumer and Small Business Telstra Upfront Mobile Plans (i.e. not pre-paid).
4. For iphones - **updated carrier settings**. Go to settings > general > about > a service provider settings update pop up may occur – click update. To check correct settings look at Service Provider – which should be Telstra 64.1.
5. A **clear line of site to the sky** - not be inside a vehicle or house or have any obstruction such as trees.
6. Ensure you are sending text/emojis only - not photos or attachments.
7. **Patience** - it can take up to 10 minutes, sometimes longer to send / receive an sms.

   NB: Do not have aeroplane mode toggled on. There is no way to 'force' the device into satellite mode. You **can not** sms emergency services in Australia. You can not make **voice calls** using this technology.

The symbols displayed on an iphone look like this, the bars show satellite service strength not mobile coverage.

The Communications Portfolio continues to be a frequently evolving portfolio but presents exciting opportunities for positive development for communications for regional, rural and remote Australians. I would like to thank all the Councillors who have assisted with the Portfolio over the past twelve months, including Amber Driver, Julia Broad, Kym Ross and Louise Martin. I would also like to thank Wendy Hick in her off-council role of Federal Communications Advisor. It has been a great comfort to have the support of Wendy's depth and breadth of knowledge.

Federal Council will continue to progress and raise the profile of our members' issues at every opportunity and ICPA (Aust) encourages members to raise with us specific connectivity challenges to ensure that future developments are meeting the needs of rural and remote families accessing education.