Communications Report

Madam President, Distinguished guests, fellow members of ICPA. ladies and gentlemen. It is with great pleasure that I present the Communications Report for the 2020 year.

Branch Motions at 2019 Buronga Conference were all carried and letters have been written highlighting the issues. These issues were also taken to deputation in Sydney throughout the year.

The Monaro Branch asked that ICPA-NSW assist ICPA (Aust) to continue lobbying all telecommunication companies and governments for mobile service coverage in rural and remote blackspot areas. The organisation continues to lobby for this through letters and delegations to the Ministers, Departments and organisations.

The fourth round of Mobile Black Spot funding is still being completed. Once this round is finished Telstra will have invested over $280 million and built more than 780 new sites in a bid to improve coverage for regional and rural areas around the country.

In addition to the mobile blackspot program Telstra has also delivered 200 small cells to selected areas where appropriate infrastructure is available. Hopefully some small country towns are accessing high-speed 4G data.

Meanwhile the Balranald Branch were wanting to see rural and remote schools prioritised for the expansion of the mobile coverage footprint throughout regional Australia.

The Balranald Branch asked the ICPA-NSW to request the NSW Department of Education to give a time frame for when satellite schools will be transferred onto the NBN Sky muster satellite.

The Rankin Springs Branch asked the organisation to lobby for TP1 and TP2 schools with satellite internet to have a secure and consistent connection.

This was to happen through the Connecting Country Schools program, and the Department is currently working to resolve this problem.

Sky muster Plus
Sky muster Plus was rolled out on 12th August 2019 giving rise to faster download speeds. This will be providing unmetered data for essential daily tasks such as online browsing, banking, accessing health or government services, keeping your smart phone and PC operating system software up to date and staying in touch with work, friends and family through emailing all of which should not be contributing to your monthly data allowance.

Telstra Go Units
Member discounts of $50 are available on the purchase of these units. However, the units must be bought through Telstra by calling 132200 for personal customers or 132000 for business account holders to ensure you get the discount. Local Telstra stores are not obliged to pass on these discounts. Units can be bought for vehicles or homes.

Regional Digital Connectivity Review
In August a review of regional digital connectivity commenced. There were many opportunities throughout regional Australia for consumers to have their say. The committee visited Moree and Boomi in this area.
There are three areas of priority for this program
1/ Internet and Data
A) What we are getting from Government and NBN?
B) Backhaul from regional centres
C) What are the challenges and what is important?
D) What you need in the future?

2/ Mobile Connectivity such as mobile blackspot program

3/ What technology is needed for Smart Agriculture?

The few stakeholders at the meeting spoke about their current experiences with their current connections. Most of that being that the current infrastructure does not allow for the download of data from John Deere tractors to farm offices, mobile phones have to be turned to 3 G to get better service, everyone is forced to buy boosters for all their vehicles and houses to get better coverage, lack of connectivity for drones to operate, lack of connectivity for rural schools to participate in a day of learning and administration work, when university students are home on holidays they need to have connectivity to sign up for their next lot of courses and submit assignments, and the cost compared to the city for our communication.

The Regional Connectivity Program needs to make sure it is fit for the future, and really does connect the most remote and rural areas. This program needs to have a minimum of standards. This program has a $220m budget.

We are now waiting for a final report from this review.

Australian Communications Consumer Action Network (ACCAN) Conference
It was a privilege in September to represent the organisation at the 10th ACCAN conference. The Action Network has come a long way and have had some huge gains in the Telecommunications industry over this period, with unjust practices, and furthering the cause for better telecommunications across Australia. One of their projects is that no Australian be left off line.

Regional Advisory Committee (RAC) for Telstra
ICPA-NSW is fortunate to have a seat on this committee. The committee is provided with updates on what is going to happen in the Telecommunications world as well as what is happening. It also gives ICPA-NSW an opportunity to raise issues of concern with regards education and telecommunications.
Telstra have reduced their available plans from 1800 to 20 for mobiles and fixed lines, and there is no lock in contracts with Telstra anymore.
Telstra is sympathetic to customers experiencing issues with paying overdue accounts because of the drought and bushfires. Telstra is happy to work with consumers who are experiencing financial difficulty with regards to their telecommunications accounts.

Closure of 3G
3G networks will be shut down in June 2024. Telstra will be doing a lot of work to educate consumers prior to this date. If you still have a 3G mobile in June 2024 it will not work after the shut down and you will have to look at other options. As we move to 2024 customers are supposed to notice an improvement in connectivity as Telstra upgrade and expand the 4G coverage. Closing 3G frees up 'spectrum' allowing for future 5G technology which would otherwise be difficult to reach without the low-band spectrum that 3G currently uses.

Digital Literacy
Digital literacy needs addressing because it is creating confusion for people needing better connection to the internet. Regional and digital hubs might be away of delivering information to the broader community. Rural businesses have become very tech savvy and require increasing amounts of data to perform business. This is particularly important with cloud accounting, auction plus an online selling platform, security, telemetering, feed calculators, water meters. It is important that these businesses can access the right data capacity at an affordable price to ensure they can run their business efficiently and effectively.

Telehealth needs Medicare rebates
The Government needs to ensure that telehealth sessions for those in the rural and remote areas doing such sessions from home are eligible for a Medicare rebate. This is especially necessary with the large increase in mental health issues and these people needing to access assistance without travelling long distances. It is important for people needing assistance with mental health that they can access help and that it remains confidential.

Real facts about the NBN
NBN Facts need to be demystified. A large percentage of the ICPA membership has a disbelief that they cannot connect to the NBN. With the rollout of Sky muster Plus customers need to be given the facts. ICPA-NSW believes NBN would benefit from town meetings and other ways of disseminating information to get the facts out there and cut down on the confusion. Within these meetings people would be able to meet the local NBN people. The local contacts need to be spread across the rural areas. There are huge benefits for students in the Sky Muster Plus, so these benefits need to be sold to the rural communities. If you need to talk to NBN please ring 1800 687 626.

Digital connectivity
Internet/ mobile connectivity as part of any Development Application to local councils from major operators/companies such as mines needs to be considered, especially when such companies are coming into rural areas. We are seeing incidents of such activities interrupting the bandwidth and local consumers are not able to connect. This is especially obvious at the end of shifts. This is also affecting local student's ability to study online.

Penalties for Telcos
Penalties need to be enforced for Telcos who do not maintain services within specified timeframes once a fault has been lodged. The distances and lack of parts needs to be taken into consideration when offering a service based on a timeframe.

Video Conferencing
There is a need to have video conferencing available in rural and remote schools for students who undertake extra curriculum studies. This facility also needs to be available for teachers and principals to utilise for Personnel Development days or courses so that they are not taken away from their classrooms and interrupting the students school week because they are not present.

NBN Multicast product
NBN's multicast product (where content is distributed to multiple receivers simultaneously) is enabling NSW Government to explore migrating DE services to the NBN Sky Muster network.

The Department has advised ICPA-NSW that it is setting up a trial with NBN that is scheduled to commence in March 2020. This trial was delayed from 2019 due to technical issues, however both the department and NBN are now confident that these have been resolved and are able to move forward. The trial will engage six isolated home sites currently engaged with distance education through Dubbo School of Distance Education during the school term, allowing a range of educational resources and interactions to be tested and evaluated.

If the trial meets the required specifications, the department can then enter a procurement process to include this service.

The Distance Education team work closely with the Department's Information Technology Directorate and will continue to provide ICPA-NSW with information on progress in this program.

Distance Education
Distance education across rural and remote NSW is currently a fully integrated/managed service via an Optus Satellite. The contract with Optus is up for renewal soon.

The Department is currently approaching the market under NSW Government Procurement guidelines for a telecommunications provider, inclusive of internet services, and have specified the requirement of a service that can deliver a target of providing acceptable speeds per student, whether that student is in a metropolitan or regional area. It is hoped that this procurement process will also provide a suitable broadband connectivity solution that will service the remaining 12 mainland school sites.

Assistance for bushfire victims
ICPA-NSW would like to take this opportunity to thank Telstra and NBN for assisting customers during the recent devastating bushfires. Telstra for the support through wiping of mobile bills for 8000 fire fighters and emergency services personnel and offering free calling from payphones and making key emergency service websites unmetered for mobile customers providing disaster assistance packages to affected customers and the work in restoring effective communication infrastructure and services as soon as possible have all been appreciated. NBN for their providing the road muster truck offing free WIFI, device charging and reconnection for communities affected by bushfire's.

Libby McPhee
Communications Convenor
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