



Progress Report 2023 Federal Conference Motions Communications Portfolio

Compiled March 2024

Communications issues continue to be raised at ICPA Federal Conferences and this area remains a focus and dedicated effort by Federal Council.

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) also continues our involvement in the Rural, Regional and Remote Communications Coalition (RRRCC), Telecommunications Industry Ombudsman (TIO) Consumer Panel, Australian Communications Consumer Action Network (ACCAN) and Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA) Consumer Consultative Forum, where we have the opportunity to raise members' issues. ICPA (Aust) also participates in regular meetings with NBN Co and Telstra. Recently a Telstra Roundtable was held, with representatives from Federal Council and all State Councils to discuss topics from across the country including the closure of the Telstra 3G network and the review into the Universal Service Obligation, to which ICPA (Aust) has made a submission. We also engage with the Regional Tech Hub on a regular basis and are able to assist members with communications needs through this channel.

Internet Access

Members continue to raise the necessity for adequate internet access commensurate to the educational needs of geographically isolated students. Following the 2023 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 regard to speed, quality, capabilities and cost of the services. A response from Mr Shervin Rafizadeh, the minister's chief of staff, in November 2023, referenced our meeting with representatives from the Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development, Communications and the Arts, where we had raised concerns about the speed and quality of members' broadband services. Mr Rafizadeh detailed the responsibilities of retail service providers and the process to be undertaken for unresolved issues.

Mr Rafizadeh outlined that the upgrades to the nbn fixed wireless network and subsequent movement of premises off the nbn Sky Muster satellites will relieve satellite capacity and has allowed nbn to offer better services on Sky Muster Plus premium plans. However, broadband speeds can be affected by a variety of factors. A recent development has been the announcement by nbn that the Sky Muster Plus premium plans now have three tiers all offering unmetered data at different speeds and price points.

In response to the introduction of LEOSat technology, Mr Rafizadeh acknowledged that there is no subsidy for these services. However, Services Australia offers a Telephone Allowance payment to eligible recipients to assist with phone and internet costs. He also referenced the government's \$4.5million investment in the School Student Broadband Initiative (SSBI), which is offering free nbn services, now until 2025, for eligible families.

Our correspondence also outlined the disparity of internet connection costs to families for the delivery of education to children enrolled in distance education between the states and territories. ICPA (Aust) requested the federal government encourage state and territory governments to provide for the delivery and maintenance of a high-speed internet connection to geographically isolated families with children enrolled in distance education at no cost to families.



Telephone

In rural and remote areas, telephone connections remain a significant and essential part of the communications services relied on by residents. Understandably, at the 2023 conference, ICPA members again requested for services to be reliable, fit for purpose and maintained at a fully functioning standard. In our correspondence to Minister Rowland following conference, we sought a commitment to ensure all communication providers fulfil their Universal Service Guarantee (USG) obligations in the provision and functionality of essential communication services to enable the delivery of rural and remote education. We sought assurances that until such time as viable alternatives are made available High Capacity Radio Concentrators (HCRC) and copper landline services for voice need to be maintained and upgraded as required.

We 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 new Universal Service Obligation (USO) voice service exceeds the reliability and quality of existing voice services.

ICPA (Aust) acknowledged that new technologies and alternative voice services are being investigated however, some of these alternatives seem to be reliant on access to a mobile service (which is not available to many rural and remote families) and other services would rely on satellite. ICPA (Aust) reiterated the imperative need for two communications services which are independent of each other in rural, regional and remote locations. We continue to advocate that all residents living in geographically isolated areas should have access to two independent communications services and not be solely reliant on one communication source while stressing that a move from existing HCRC or copper line services to Voice over Internet Protocol (VOIP) services reliant on satellite is not a satisfactory replacement of legacy voice services at this time, where rural and remote residents currently only have satellite internet access.

ICPA (Aust) also highlighted a further barrier to digital technology use in regional, rural and remote areas is the concern that in order to access these services, the equipment required needs electricity to work. Both mobile and internet services require power (especially if using fixed Smart Antennae or Cel-Fi equipment) and if there is a power outage, which can be frequent in rural and remote areas, the service cannot be relied upon and many properties that are on self-generated power do not run their generators 24 hours a day.

We also emphasised that in considering alternative voice services it is imperative that any possible solutions are rigorously tested for robustness in areas where there remains no mobile coverage to prove that they can be relied upon and withstand the harsh weather and environmental events of rural and remote Australia. Testing their reliability, durability and quality in urban settings is not reflective of the environments in which they will be used and relied upon.

Ms Nicolle Power, Assistant Secretary, Universal Services Branch responded on behalf of Minister Rowland. Ms Power informed us the government is interested in looking at ways to improve the delivery of USO services and welcomed our views. ICPA (Aust) presented a submission to the Australian Government Review into the Better Delivery of Universal Services on 1 March 2024, emphasising the requirements of service delivery for regional, rural and remote families.

Ms Power also advised that, under current USO arrangements, Telstra is required to publicly report on its performance in delivering regional voice services at the local exchange level against key indicators, including service availability, connection timeframes, faults and outages, repair timeframes and appointment timeframes, as well as providing national complaint and customer contact handling performance data. Generally, this data across rural and remote areas suggests there is high availability, low fault rates and most voice services are restored within required timeframes. Ms Power is keen to hear if there are situations where Telstra are not fulfilling this requirement.



ICPA (Aust) was further reassured that while the federal government is carefully monitoring technology developments, including Low Earth Orbiting Satellites (LEOs) that Telstra is not currently able to decommission its rural and remote copper network where it is supporting voice services under existing USO arrangements.

In relation to the issue of power and reliability she explained the federal government is taking important steps to support more resilient telecommunications services, however the responsibility for broader regulation of the supply and generation of electricity rests with state and territory governments.

In the 2022-2023 Budget the federal government committed \$2.2 billion to regional connectivity over the next 5 years, including \$480 million towards an upgrade of the entire NBN fixed wireless footprint by the end of 2024. Additionally, this upgrade is resulting in improving broadband speeds on the fixed wireless network and greater data speeds to satellite premises.

The federal government is also investing \$656 million to improve regional connectivity under its Better Connectivity Plan for Regional and Rural Australia. This Plan includes \$400 million dedicated to boosting mobile coverage and resilience, \$200 million for place-based connectivity solutions under two new rounds of the Regional Connectivity Program (RCP), \$30 million for on-farm connectivity, \$20 million for an independent audit of mobile coverage to better identify and target blackspots, and a \$6 million boost in funding for the Regional Tech Hub, a platform serving as a trusted source of free and independent advice for regional Australians on digital connectivity options.

Federal Council met with Ms Power in person at our October delegations together with Dan Irvine, A/g Director/Regional Broadband/Universal Services and Garth Donovan, Director, USG Reliability/USO Delivery. Discussions centred around the reliability issues of our members, trials of new technologies and reinforcing the need for the delivery of two separate forms of communication independent of each other. At every opportunity, ICPA (Aust) raises this topic.

We have also implored that any testing or investigation of alternative services needs to be undertaken in real life situations and in particular in remote locations where our members will be impacted by any changes. We have received assurance from Telstra that this will be the case. Federal Council understands this is a considerable concern for those members who may be impacted and will continue to ensure we maintain robust advocacy on this topic.

Other relevant communications topics

The Telstra 3G network is to close on 30th June 2024 and Telstra have reiterated that in areas that currently only have a 3G signal they are committed to providing 4G before they close 3G. ICPA (Aust) will be monitoring this changeover closely.

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.

Portfolio Leader-Sally Brindal

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