COMMUNICATIONS REPORT

Joanna Gibson

I am pleased to once again report on communications related matters and highlight areas of relevance for families educating children living in rural and remote locations. The portfolio has been kept busy addressing the 32 communications motions presented at Federal Conference in Perth last year. The motions mainly concerned **nbn**, the Mobile Black Spot Program, Telstra faults and services. These have been actioned in our delegations to Canberra, through submissions and letters as well as through the many communications groups that ICPA (Aust) is a part of. At every opportunity, we have expressed the concerns of ICPA members.

Nbn
Education Port
The education port is available for geographically isolated distance education students receiving the Assistance of Isolated Children (AIC) allowance. Since the first education port connection in Queensland in June 2016 there is now take up in all states and territories of Australia. Queensland and Western Australia have the majority of working connections to date. **Nbn** trials are taking place to further improve the delivery of educational materials over Sky Muster™ with user acceptance testing to start in Term 3, 2017 in some Northern Territory distance education student classrooms.

Access to the education port is also available to Home Education (HE) Students in all States. The students need to be receipt of either a geographically isolated or medical AIC allowance plus be a registered HE Student in order to be eligible. These requirements are the same for all students in all states. A recent report from **nbn**, shows this availability has been taken up across the states but in low numbers.

The **nbn** sets the access rules and the wholesale price for the Education Port. The individual RSPs set the retail price, however not all RSPs provide access to the Education Port. Currently the education port providers are:
Activ8- http://www.activ8me.net.au/internet/skymuster
ANT- https://www.ant.com.au/nbn/lts/education
HarbourISP- https://www.harbourisp.com.au/plan/nbn-educational-pip-plan/
Skymesh- https://www.skymesh.net.au/services/nbn/satellite/education.php
Clearnetworks- https://www.clearnetworks.com.au/nbn-skymuster/educational-plans

Wi-Fi Trial
Many members have been concerned about the Qantas Wi-Fi trial that is in progress at the moment. **nbn** have assured us that this is a trial, designed to not have an impact on Sky Muster™ users and they are 100% committed to ensuring that regional and remote Australia remains their top priority. The trial with QANTAS and ViaSat should help fast track technology that could support similar services. A 6 month trial for the Royal Flying Doctor Service, so RFDS planes can communicate with specialists on the ground, will commence in September. The software developed in the trial will open the door to the development of products to support mobile satellite units for various situations requiring emergency services when there is a natural disaster and also explore the possibility of mobile Sky Muster™ receivers for tractors and utes.

As the number of users on Sky Muster™ increased so did the bugs in the software, and network failures started to appear. **Nbn** have worked hard to address these issues, however the Sky Muster™ satellite

service will never be as reliable as the service many people receive in metropolitan areas. The satellite is susceptible to rain fade, so when there is heavy rain the service goes out. Bill Morrow, CEO of Nbn Co has stated that "There is only going to be so much we can do, but we will make sure that at least it can perform at the best possible according to that design."

The delivery of high–speed broadband to remote and regional Australia is a key priority for the **nbn**. Fixed line, fixed wireless and satellite infrastructure is on target to be available to around 3.6 million remote and regional premises by 2020. The fixed wireless and satellite networks that provide broadband services to regional Australians are expected to be completed in 2018.

After a delayed launch the second satellite was launched into orbit in October last year and Sky Muster™ II is now fully operational. Originally it was planned as a backup but it is now sharing the load with SkyMuster™. These satellites are made to deliver high-speed internet to the four per cent of Australians who would never have received broadband any other way.

In late June, Senator the Hon Fiona Nash, Minister for Regional Communications and **nbn** made an announcement to confirm the increase in wholesale data capacity for the Sky Muster™ satellite service. From October 2017, **nbn** will be doubling the maximum monthly wholesale data limits and increasing average peak downloads plans by up to 50 per cent on the Sky Muster™ platform. As a result, the majority of consumers and businesses on the service are expected to receive larger peak and off-peak plans from their retailer at a similar cost to what they are paying today. These new changes will see wholesale allowable **peak** plans on the Sky Muster™ service go to 150 GB (from 75GB) and **total monthly** plans go to 300GB (from 150GB). **Nbn** has listened to feedback from the community and rural industry groups, small schools and distance education students will also benefit from this increase as well, via the Education Port.

ICPA (Aust) has regular meetings with **nbn** as part of the satellite stakeholder roundtable and enjoys a good working relationship with them. One strong message is that **nbn** cannot fix a problem if they do not know about it and we encourage members to contact us if they are experiencing difficulties with their service in relation to their students' schooling.

Mobile Black Spot Program
765 new mobile phone towers are being rolled out under Rounds One and Two of the Mobile Black Spot Program and there is a firm commitment for another $60 million to be spent on round three once they are finished. Most profitable sites have already been recognised in Rounds One and Two. The third round of government Mobile Black Spot Program (MBSP) funding locations was announced in May, with an aim to address areas that may not be commercially profitable but have a need for coverage. This round will target 125 specific priority locations that were not included in previous rounds. ICPA (Aust) will continue our lobbying efforts as we advocate for more rural and remote areas to be covered by the program.

Our meetings with government representatives indicated that discussions have already begun on what future rounds may look like and how they may be implemented, so there is certainly an indication that Mobile Black Spot Rounds will continue, although possibly not in the format we have seen up to now.

Telstra
ICPA (Aust) has worked with Telstra since conference to address members' concerns. It is important that motions are accompanied by specific examples and customer reports. Telstra are working on ways to improve the speed in which they identify issues and arrange repairs. Many of the motions dealt with issues

that were included in our response to the Draft Productivity Commission Report into the Telecommunications Universal Service Obligation. The final report is due to be released in 2017.

The adding of unmetered educational sites for NSW and NT has been completed. Telstra offers unmetered access to a number of key Education websites for all BigPond and Telstra Mobile Broadband users.

Submissions
Over the months since our last conference Federal Council has had input into the ACCC discussion papers on Broadband Speed Claims and the Domestic Mobile Roaming Declaration Inquiry.

We contributed to the Australian Communications Consumer Action Network (ACCAN) Review in November and we have presented submissions to the Productivity Commission's Draft Report into the Universal Service Obligation, the Telecommunications Reform Package and the **nbn** joint standing committee discussion on the **nbn**. Federal councillors have also presented in person at the Productivity Commission Public Hearings and the **nbn** Joint Standing Committee hearing, ensuring our members' voices were heard.

The Productivity Commissions (PC) report on the Telecommunications Universal Service Obligation (USO), which ensures that all premises can access a voice service, was released to the public on June 19, 2017. The PC found that the current system does not deliver for consumers or Government and have recommended significant changes, including removing the current contract with Telstra that delivers voice services, leveraging the National Broadband Network to deliver data services and the introduction of targeted programs specifically to provide for voice and community services.

A number of the recommendations will improve services for regional consumers. These include the development of a baseline voice and data service, the review of telecommunication safeguards and a legislative guarantee that all premises can access a 25Mbps broadband network.

However, some recommendations are concerning:
- The use of mobile services to deliver voice services in areas in the satellite footprint, is concerning as the PC suggests that a program to ensure these premises (it estimates 90 000) can access mobile coverage outside their premises. Such a program may not ensure coverage inside the house, may be based on network coverage maps rather than actual coverage, and may take a long time to rollout.
- The use of the Fixed Wireless network to deliver voice services in those areas. NBN have said the network is not designed to connect all premises and deliver a voice service to them.

To date the Government has not commented on the report or a provided a response on the Productivity Commission's recommendations. ICPA (Aust) will closely monitor the government's actions on this report.

The Telecommunications Reform Package legislation was introduced into Parliament in the last sitting week prior to the winter break. It included a guarantee for all premises to be able to access a broadband service, capable of at least 25Mbps download and 5Mbps upload.

The package is also a win for consumers, particularly those in regional, rural and remote areas, as it will guarantee access to a data network for all premises, through the Statutory Infrastructure Provider (SIP). There is currently no sufficient statutory obligation for **nbn** to provide a connection to all premises.

Regional, Rural and Remote Communications Coalition (RRRCC)
ICPA (Aust) is also part of the newly formed RRRCC (2016/17) whose purpose is to bring together like-minded groups that are concerned about a lack of connectivity in the bush. ICPA (Aust) attended the inaugural meeting together with organisations such as the National Farmers Federation, ACCAN, Country Women's Association (CWA) Australia, AgForce, WA Farmers, GrainGrowers and the Better Internet for Rural Regional and Remote Australia (BIRRR) group; our collective voices are being heard across the country.

There are five broad key outcomes sought by the Coalition, so that 2017 is the year that ends the data drought, and the year when reliable connectivity is delivered to rural, regional and remote Australia through:
1. Guaranteed access to voice and data services
2. Customer service guarantees to ensure that voice and data services meet minimum standards and reliability.
3. Continued program to expand mobile coverage
4. Fair and equitable access to Sky Muster satellite services for those with a genuine need for the service, and plans and data allowances which reflect the residential, educational and business needs of rural and regional Australia
5. Grants program to develop and support digital literacy and capacity building.

Being a member of such a diverse group, who all have interests in rural and remote areas is a huge positive for our campaign to improve communications for those that rely on it for equity of access to education.

Domestic Mobile Roaming
ACCC's draft recommendation that wholesale mobile roaming not be implemented was released on May 5, 2017.
https://www.accc.gov.au/regulated-infrastructure/communications/mobile-services/domestic-mobile-roaming-declaration-inquiry-2016
ICPA (Aust)'s position has been that we welcome the ACCC investigating this issue and we mentioned in our submission that our members had voted against supporting mobile roaming endeavours at our last federal conference. Our main message is that priority for our members is expansion of mobile coverage out into the areas where they live, work and are educated. We also support the comment that if mobile roaming is not being undertaken, that the service providers that are in the bush need to now fulfil their obligations and expand infrastructure to additional areas as well as maintaining services adequately. On June 2, 2017, Vodaphone made an application to the Federal Court of Australia seeking a review of ACCC's conduct in holding a public inquiry under the *Telecommunications Act 1997* on the basis of the draft decision and the making of the draft decision and a hearing date of June 30 was set.

Throughout the last year, the communications portfolio has done an enormous amount of work towards ensuring that members' issues are understood. Federal Council would like to encourage everyone to keep in touch with case studies and communications issues that are affecting you and your children as they access education in rural and remote Australia. It makes our lobbying efforts more successful when we have examples to substantiate our campaign. There are many vital issues being debated in 2017 that will shape the future of telecommunications in the bush and it is important to ensure the voice of non-metropolitan end-users is heard. Thank you to the State Portfolio leaders for their support and to our members who have contacted me throughout the year.