

## Regional consumers too often left behind

The Regional Telecommunications Review is an opportune time to take stock of telecommunications policy in Australia. Whether it is an oversubscribed interim satellite service or a Universal Service Obligation that hasn't been brought into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, regional consumers are frequently left with shocking network performance and few avenues for redress.

ACCAN often hears the horror stories about regional communications. From a farmer in rural WA who despite successive 'repairs' had to hold his landline handset 10cm away from his ear to hear over the static; to the outdoor recreation business which may soon have to close after a loss of customers due to an unreliable booking phone line; and the school children who have to stop lessons 20 days into the month because their restrictive satellite data quota has been used up.

As a result ACCAN chose to focus its submission to the Regional Telecommunications Review on the lack of appropriate consumer safeguards over communications services. Anyone with even a vague familiarity with telecommunications is aware that mobile and internet are now equally, if not more, important than the Standard Telephone Service (STS). With 12 million internet subscriptions, 31 million mobile services and around 9 million fixed telephone services the shift in consumer preference is clear. Given the importance of each of these services it is difficult to *only* justify protection over the STS.

Internet and mobile connections are now the preferred communication methods for many Australians. A guarantee of fitness for purpose over these services is specifically exempted from the Australian Consumer Law. This exemption was always on the understanding that communications are so crucial to many areas of human endeavour that specific safeguards were required. With current safeguards only focussed on the STS a chasm has opened in consumer protection.

The rollout of the NBN provides an opportunity to realign consumer safeguards around these new communication services without adding significant new cost to industry. As the NBN is rolled out the policy effort should be directed to the needs of consumers in a broadband environment. The NBN also has the potential to streamline how services are delivered to consumers, with a single wholesale network able to provide most premises with voice, data and limited mobile (through voice over Wi-Fi).

This has the potential to be a boon for regional consumers if it can overcome lingering problems with in-home mobile coverage. Additionally as voice switches to IP it simplifies a policy guarantee over mobile service. So long as the underlying broadband service is subject to a guarantee, consumers will have a guarantee over mobile calls within range of their Wi-Fi.

This won't solve mobile coverage issues for many consumers. Universal access and network reliability guarantees need to be a part of a holistic approach, which includes policies like the Mobile Black Spots Programme.

It is time to bring communications policy into the modern world and set a standard that reflects the needs of consumers and business. We need a mature approach to universal access and network reliability which balances the realistic capabilities of the network with the need to keep consumers connected.