

Internet connectivity is so important for Regional Growth?

Action group “Better Internet For Rural, Regional and Remote Australia” recently surveyed 750 Sky Muster customers, with 60 per cent saying the satellites did not meet their data needs, 86 per cent had connection issues and 91 per cent saying “the data drought was not over”. A recent in-depth report by BIRRRRA found that rural, regional and remote people are severely disadvantaged in terms of access, speeds, cost and reliability of their internet connections, whether they be via mobile broadband or via satellite. “People are clearly worried that as more and more activities become data hungry, current and proposed plans will be unable to handle the extra load. We already know data use growth is a continuing upward trend: The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) reports the average broadband downloads grew more than 33 per cent from December 2013 to December 2014.”

The ABS report also showed that, on average, each Australian household has eight Internet connected devices – already many bush connections cannot support that load, and there is increasing concern that data limits announced for SkyMuster by nbn will simply not be sufficient into the future.

These issues have had (and continue to have) a dramatic effect on rural, regional and remote peoples business, the education of their children, themselves, and on their personal well-being. In a recent online article by Peter Hunt for the Weekly Times he sums up the concerns regional Australia has as ‘AUSTRALIA’S data drought’ saying it has hit crisis point with download rationing, repeated disconnections and high costs leaving 400,000 rural families and businesses facing an ever-widening digital divide. Peter explained the costs stating “While urban Australians are spoilt for choice, with limitless download capacity for less than \$90 a month, the average Sky Muster customer is forced to pay \$135 for a monthly ration of 55 gigabytes for downloads between 7am and 1am.”

The internet revolution has promised to change the face of agriculture, allowing farmers to shift their focus from managing paddocks and herds down to square metres and individual animals. The Australian Farm Institute’s 2016 report titled Implications of Digital Agriculture and Big Data found: “As agriculture becomes more exposed to ‘big data’ the number and size of files being uploaded and downloaded from farm machinery platforms will increase dramatically.” The Institute highlighted that broadband connectivity was crucial for machinery diagnostics and would increasingly rely on the cloud to transfer data downloads on yields, seed, fertiliser, spray applications and guidance files.

So what does this mean for you and me, “There is little doubt that the world is becoming more and more centred around the internet – from business accounting clouds to

online education courses and distance education, from virtual medical consultations to emergency contact points, from the latest app developments for farming ventures and simple tools of communication, it’s all happening online. In 2011 the United Nations declared that internet access was a basic human right stating “Internet access is no longer an ‘option’ – it’s an essential part of everyday life.”

The Dandaragan Shire Internet Initiative can see that poor broadband is curbing business, education, health and social services across our region. We believe the solution to download rationing is to move as many communities as possible off Sky Muster and on to the far more effective fixed wireless network, which offers anytime and unlimited monthly downloads. This system can also extend the reach of fixed wireless towers using boosters in a method known as “daisy chaining”.

“Currently internet connectivity does not meet the educational, business, health & welfare needs of regional Australians. Peak Data of 75GB on NBN satellite will not future proof Australia’s data needs. Nor will it end the #datadrought. The Long Term Satellite is not a long term solution for rural, regional and remote users of the internet.” stated BIRRRRA This is a national problem with AgForce vice-president Georgie Somerset, who represents Queensland farmers, saying some landholders were setting up wi-fi connections, at a cost of \$1000 to \$1500, from their homes to receivers that put them within range of NBN fixed wireless towers. NBN are now restricting access to these towers.

Dandaragan Shire Internet Initiative WP members, are responding to concerns expressed by our community and businesses complaining about the current connectivity and the way it is restricting their ability to function. We need change now and together we can plan to gain a better and more sustainable, long term cost effective outcome for our region. Firstly we need your input by completing the survey either on-line or in hard copy and returning to the Dandaragan CRC. Please take five minutes to fill in the survey, as this will provide a scoping document, providing a big picture assessment of our community and region, indicating the number keen to be part of this change plus providing data supporting requests to access money needed to conduct a feasibility study. The on-line survey can be found on the Dandaragan CRC Facebook page or put into your search engine. Please contact the CRC staff for assistance during office hours if needed. Paper copies are available at the Dandaragan CRC and local store.

The closing date for survey responses has been extended to the end of January 2017.

