

Australia embarks on great broadband adventure

September 27 2009, by Amy Coopes



A senior manager with auditing giant KPMG works on his laptop at a beef cattle farm near the small Australian town of Harden, four hours drive away from Sydney. From snowy mountains and sun-baked deserts to the steamy tropical north, Australia has begun wiring its vast expanse with a high-tech broadband network in a giant project being closely followed abroad.

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Workmen are already digging trenches in island state Tasmania, the first step in a 37 billion US dollar scheme which Prime Minister Kevin Rudd calls Australia's biggest ever infrastructure venture.

The ambitious plan aims to connect 90 percent of homes, including remote Outback settlements and sprawling coastal cities, with fibre-optic

cable by 2017, accelerating lagging network speeds and boosting the economy.

The sheer scale of the project has drawn interest from foreign governments including the United States, where President Barack Obama has outlined similar plans.

Engineers will lay cable across 7.7 million square kilometres (3 million square miles) of often challenging terrain which covers an area equivalent to two European Unions.

"There's no kidding about it, it's a massive job," [telecommunications](#) analyst Paul Budde told AFP.

"You have to physically go to 10 million premises and bring a cable there, either (by) digging it or via (power) poles and then obviously it's not just having the cable, you have to have the installation in the house."

Specialised French digging machines have been shipped to Tasmania to lay the first of millions of kilometres of fibre-optic cable. By next June, three pilot towns are expected to be enjoying connection speeds of 100 megabits per second.

Just 0.1 percent of Australians are currently linked to fibre-optic cable with most accessing the Internet over the 100-year-old copper telephone network, prompting Rudd to call the country a "broadband backwater".

Rudd, announcing the project in April, said Australia had some of the developed world's slowest Internet speeds and lowest access rates. Some Outback communities rely on dial-up connections and others have no Internet at all.

"It is good for business, good for productivity, good for the delivery of e-

health, good for e-education and good for Australia," Rudd said this month.

Industry expert Reg Coutts, who advised the government on the network, said the venture had attracted top-level attention in the United States and other countries.

"There's really an absolute interest, particularly in America, but also in Europe," he told AFP.

"People are asking, 'What the hell are you doing and how are you doing it?' People of course are sceptical," he said.

Laying the network was only the first step, he added, with the real challenge transitioning 10 million customers from old TV, telephone and Internet networks to the new system.

"That alone, we have never seen on that magnitude anywhere in the world," Budde said.

Once laid, there was "really no limit" to what the fibre network could do, said Ravi Bhatia, CEO of Primus Telecom and spokesman for industry consortium Terria.

He said technological advances in areas such as satellite mapping would make the roll-out easier than it would have been even three years ago, allowing for "smart" deployment of resources and machines to dig and pull cable.

"By using the latest technology building this network we create another set of skills which we can then export to other countries and build their networks," said Bhatia.

Government adviser Coutts said every developed country was grappling with the same question: how to replace ageing once-public infrastructure that now belonged to private companies.

Teams of lawyers and economists were racing to untangle complex commercial questions of how to use existing exchanges, underground ducts and power lines to minimise building work, said Budde.

[Australia](#) moved to deal with the problem by serving telco giant Telstra, the former state-owned monopoly, with an ultimatum to split its network and retail businesses or face being barred from further wireless spectrum.

Coutts said there was "a lot of infrastructure that could potentially be utilised in the NBN (National [Broadband Network](#))" but estimated it was only about 10 percent of what was needed.

"Most of what's going to go on is purely civil works, actually pulling in and splicing optical fibre to replace the copper," he said.

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