

Australia extends deadline for broadband network

March 25 2011

Australian senators have extended by two-and-a-half years the deadline for completion of the country's national broadband network in order to connect an extra million homes.

The company building the Aus\$36 billion (\$36 billion) system, NBN Co, now has until December 2020 to build the infrastructure across the vast continent, instead of the original June 2018 date.

Communications Minister Stephen Conroy said more time was needed to wire up 93 percent of residences, rather than the 90 percent first planned, to the high-speed optical fibre network.

"The build has expanded," he told the Senate, before the amendment was passed on Thursday.

The government argues the [broadband network](#) will boost the economy and ease isolation for the huge country's rural regions, but the opposition claims it is too expensive.

Conroy forced an extra day of debate on the scheme after unveiling 23 pages of amendments to existing NBN legislation late on Wednesday.

Australia's second largest telecoms firm Optus has already expressed concerns about the proposed changes. Among them are proposals that would allow some companies, such as utility providers, to buy their Internet access directly from NBN rather than through retailers such as

Optus and Telstra, as originally envisaged.

Telecoms companies also fear another amendment could water down the competition regulator's powers.

"To be frank these new amendments have thrown us a curve ball," Optus chief executive Paul O'Sullivan said.

The broadband scheme was a key election pledge from Labor Prime Minister Julia Gillard and a major factor in allowing her to form a minority government backed by rural independents after last year's polls were deadlocked.

The government hopes the delivery of broadband will revolutionise workplaces and services -- including in education and health -- for a nation where thousands live in remote communities.

Most homes and businesses will be connected to optical fibre but a small proportion will be linked to NBN via wireless or satellite technology due to the vastness of the country.

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