

SafetyNet – Beyond mobile declaration

A new approach to meet the needs of rural and remote customers

Rural and remote areas will continue to struggle to keep up with urban telecommunications despite the progress that has been made with initiatives such as the Mobile Black Spot Program (MBSP) and the NBN fixed wireless and satellite. A more radical approach is needed as we consider updating the Universal Service Obligation, public safety network options and mobile roaming. Instead of more expensive small gains at the margin, or counter productive roaming arrangements, we should take a large step forward by having the Commonwealth, States and MNOs work together.

The SafetyNet model proposed [here](#) would:

- ✓ Resolve the conflict between coverage and competition which is prominent in all rural and remote communications programs and discussions.
- ✓ Expand the current, narrow view of what communications mean for rural and remote customers. In addition to conventional mobile network services, the SafetyNet solution will contribute to making land more productive and improving public safety.
- ✓ Reduce the inefficient use of public and private resources to meet the needs of rural and remote customers by taking a cooperative portfolio approach across governments and private operators.
- ✓ Improve the affordability of rural communications by reducing costs and providing more choices for end users.
- ✓ Resolve the issue of the 90,000 satellite users that the Productivity Commission's draft report on the USO estimates will have worse quality voice services when the existing copper network is decommissioned
- ✓ Relieve concerns about the future capacity of the Long Term Satellite Service; while providing better broadband service over LTE.

The NBN and mobile blackspot programmes are achievements not to be sniffed at. But, two frontiers remain - the IOT (Internet of Things) in rural and remote areas (needed to make things and land more productive) and public safety. These needs represent the next profound shift after moving from voice to data and then from fixed to mobile. We need networks that underpin everyday living, working and playing but not only through calls, texts or browsing but also by supporting the fundamental infrastructure that feeds us, transports us, provides power and water, and keeps us safe.

Country customers want improved mobile coverage more than they want competition. Because of rural economics, it is difficult to have both – unless policy makers consider more radical alternatives than the ACCC is able to contemplate.

What we need is open access together with improved mobile coverage. A more holistic "SafetyNet" approach integrating various requirements and pooling resources would work with

the demanding economics of the bush and allow retail competition despite coverage challenges. This requires a coordinated response across Federal, State and Local Governments to manage a portfolio of investments as an operator would – not as a collection of disparate policies overtaken by rapidly evolving requirements.

Let's call the common infrastructure Australia's SafetyNet; a single fit for purpose LTE network for rural and remote areas. This could be used to meet a range of needs that individually have a poor business case. A single, open access network has better economics and would go a long way to meeting the aspirations of rural customers with greater coverage, capacity and scope.

An obvious candidate to operate SafetyNet is the nbn given its role as the existing government owned, wholesale communications supplier. But, to this point it has not shown much inclination to sub-contract infrastructure (witness the greenfields fibre debacle).

Another, complication which needs to be considered is the possible future privatisation of nbn's fixed wireless and/or satellite assets. This might provide the opportunity to establish the nucleus of a commercially operated SafetyNet.

A possible alternative is to franchise the operation of a wholesale SafetyNet to an existing MNO or consortium of MNOs. In the area of public safety, capabilities such as Telstra's LANES technology have growing potential to support existing and emerging new needs of public safety agencies on the same infrastructure as provides mobile coverage.

It is in the interests of the MNOs to cooperate regardless of who runs SafetyNet:

First, to respect the MNO's investments and to ensure that public investment in SafetyNet does not stifle private investment, the mobile operators should be given the opportunity to put forward in confidence their committed plans for expanding coverage over (*say*) the next three years. Based on these plans, identify the residual area (*let's call it "the underserved area"*) that has no prospect of achieving coverage through the operation of free market forces. This area is fair game for public investment and SafetyNet. If the MNO plans for expanding coverage do not materialise within the specified period, the boundaries of the underserved area could be expanded accordingly.

Second, governments and operators could become equity partners in SafetyNet based on the MNOs' contributions of infrastructure and the Commonwealth's contributions around the USO and/or public safety assets.

Australia's SafetyNet would provide network infrastructure for the rural and remote areas of Australia that would otherwise miss out on the availability of competitive mobile communications infrastructure and up-to-date public safety infrastructure. It also provides a safety net for those who cannot afford or use legacy communications(e.g. homeless) as well as supporting the Internet of Things in rural and remote areas to ensure the optimum use of Australia's natural resources.

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