MEDIA RELEASE

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Telecommunications network resilience

Minister for Communications, Cyber Safety and the Arts, the Hon Paul Fletcher MP, today convened a roundtable meeting with Australia's major telecommunications companies to discuss network resilience in the recent severe bushfires.

Telstra Chief Executive Andy Penn, Optus Chief Executive Allen Lew, Vodafone Chief Executive Iñaki Berroeta, NBN Chief Executive Stephen Rue and TPG Chief Operating Officer Craig Levy attended the roundtable, along with senior representatives from other telecommunications sector organisations including the Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA), Australian Mobile Telecommunications Association (AMTA), Communications Alliance, the NSW Telco Authority and the Australian Communications Consumer Action Network (ACCAN). Emergency management organisations including the Bushfire Recovery Agency and Emergency Management Australia were also in attendance.

Minister Fletcher said the meeting addressed both the immediate response to the impact of the bushfires on communications services, as well as longer term initiatives to bolster network resilience.

The Minister commended the telcos and their staff for working to restore services as quickly as possible, as well as providing relief packages to affected areas. The NSW Telco Authority noted the telcos had been exceptionally responsive during the crisis.

The roundtable also acknowledged the assistance and support provided by the Australian Defence Force (ADF) in providing access to critical infrastructure for telcos to repair and restore services.

The roundtable agreed that access to power was critical. Most network outages following the bushfires have been due to loss of power, not due to direct bushfire damage to network facilities.

The telcos also identified the difficulty the bushfire situation created in accessing some sites where mobile infrastructure is located to assess damage and install generators.

Participants discussed initiatives to improve network resilience in the future, including:
- Further clearing of bush around mobile base stations and transmission facilities to create larger firebreaks
- Information sharing from the energy companies on the availability of power to enable telcos to prioritise the deployment of generators
- Enabling telecommunications operators to access emergency fuel stores to support the refuelling of diesel generators providing back-up power to mobile base stations.

The roundtable agreed to the following key actions:
- The roundtable agreed that ACMA, working with industry peak bodies Communications Alliance and AMTA, will conduct an industry-wide review into the impact of the bushfires on telecommunications networks, and how the operators responded.
- Communications Alliance will lead, on behalf of industry, the development of a national common operating model for telecommunications disaster management to underpin efficient interaction with state government lead agencies.
- AMTA will work with industry to ensure emergency coordination agencies have better information about the location of critical mobile infrastructure.

The industry will also work with the Government to investigate options to increase network resilience in the future, and to improve the continuity of services to Australians, examining issues such as:
- Industry coordination of advice to residents in affected areas
- Options for greater network redundancy to support critical services such as banking and EFTPOS in areas affected by natural disasters
- Ways to make better use of Wi-Fi and satellite services to provide connectivity in areas where mobile networks are down
- Whether there is a need for additional temporary facilities such as Cells On Wheels (COWs) to replace damaged facilities
- Whether network resilience could be further improved.

"While no telecommunications network is 100 per cent impervious to damage from natural disasters, Australians naturally want to be confident our communications networks are as resilient as possible during times of emergency," Minister Fletcher said.

"We are better placed than twenty or thirty years ago; the combination of mobile, fixed line and satellite connectivity combined with mobile COWs and temporary satellites on the NBN that can be deployed – means we now have greater back-ups and options to keep our vital communications networks up and running."

"This bushfire season is not over yet and may continue into 2020 – the telecommunications industry is working hard to help affected communities and is well-positioned to react quickly to any future bushfires."

The roundtable followed a visit by Minister Fletcher yesterday to fire-affected areas in Moruya, Batemans Bay and Malua Bay where he inspected network facilities and met with local residents.

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Additional information

The Government welcomes the actions taken by the telecommunications industry to support Australians affected by the bushfires.

These include:
- Telstra deployment of Cell on Wheels temporary facilities to support emergency services operations and communities in affected areas.
- Optus deployment of Satellite Small Cells (SatCats) and Cells on Wheels to support emergency services and provide coverage to impacted communities
- Vodafone deployment of new transmission links and generators to restore services along the NSW South Coast
- Telstra enabling its national payphone network for free calls and the use of its Telstra Air payphones as free Wi-Fi hotspots in bushfire-affected regions.
- Distribution of Telstra satellite phones to emergency services and communities.
- NBN Co deployment of Road Muster trucks to several evacuation and relief centres, offering free Wi-Fi as well as news and weather updates. These included evacuation centres at Hanging Rock Sports Oval in Batemans Bay and Malua Bay Surf Club on the NSW South Coast.
- NBN Co installation of Sky Muster satellite dishes to provide free Wi-Fi hotspots and established mobile device charging facilities at 29 evacuation centres in NSW, Victoria and South Australia – at its peak supporting around 5,000 affected residents, business owners and support staff.

The Government also commends the telecommunications industry on the range of financial relief packages being offered to bushfire-affected customers and front-line responders.

Telstra:

- **Victoria:** https://exchange.telstra.com.au/victoria-bushfire-assistance-2019/
- **New South Wales:** https://exchange.telstra.com.au/providing-bushfire-relief-to-our-customers-affected-in-new-south-wales/
- **South Australia:** https://exchange.telstra.com.au/bushfire-relief-package-south-australia/

Optus

- https://www.optus.com.au/about/media-centre/bushfire-support

Vodafone Hutchison Australia (VHA)

- https://www.vodafone.com.au/about/company/bushfire-support

TPG group

- TPG: https://www.tpg.com.au/services/bushfire-support
- Internode: https://www.internode.on.net/