MEDIA RELEASE

27 October 2020

Keeping Australians safe through more resilient telecommunications

The Morrison Government is working with telcos to bolster the resilience of communications networks serving communities threatened by bushfire.

Minister for Communications, Cyber Safety and the Arts, the Hon Paul Fletcher MP has today announced grants to four major telcos for temporary, portable communications facilities that will be rapidly deployed to communities and evacuation centres. During the 2019–20 bushfires, similar facilities provided critical connectivity during network outages.

In May 2020, Minister Fletcher announced a $37.1 million Strengthening Telecommunications Against Natural Disasters (STAND) package. Of this, $8.3 million was allocated to run a competitive grants process to purchase portable communications facilities which can be positioned in bushfire affected areas to allow communications services to be restored quickly.

Today the Minister announced the successful applicants for these grants are NBN Co, TPG Telecom, Telstra and Optus, who are now in negotiations with the Government to fund temporary telecommunications facilities and equipment, such as cells on wheels (COWs) and Satellite powered COWs (known as SatCOWs or sometimes SatCATs). The telcos will contribute 50 per cent of the capital costs of the facilities, doubling the capital funding available to deploy more and better facilities. Further announcements will be made as negotiations are concluded.

In addition to these grants, NBN Co has been allocated $1.7 million to purchase five newly designed NBN Road Muster trucks and 12 portable satellite kits, to be delivered before the end of this year, bringing the total investment in portable communications facilities to $10 million.

"These grants will enhance the capability of telcos to maintain mobile and broadband coverage in areas impacted during natural disasters, allowing Australians to contact family and essential services, and making sure food, water and fuel purchases can occur," Minister Fletcher said. "Access to reliable communications before, during and after a natural disaster is critical to the safety of all Australians".

More information on the program is available on the Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Communications website.

Media contact:
Imre Salusinszky | 0432 535 737 | imre.salusinszky@communications.gov.au

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

Below are examples of the temporary facilities that may be funded under the program, subject to the commercial negotiations between the Commonwealth and the successful grant applicants.

Cells on Wheels (COW): A COW is a portable mobile network tower that restores mobile phone services over an area of up to several kilometres from the COW, depending on elevation of the COW, the local geography, vegetation and the number of people accessing the cell provided by the COW. The COW includes an antenna tower and an electronic radio transceiver that connects into the wider mobile phone network using radio links or terrestrial cables.

Satellite cells on wheels (SatCOW) / SatCATs: A SatCOW is similar to a COW but connects to the wider telecommunications networks using a satellite link. SatCOWs can be deployed to remote locations (some can be transported by air) and can provide a small area of mobile coverage for Emergency Service Organisations (ESO's) and the local community covering a radius of several hundreds of metres up to possibly 1-2km's depending on SatCOW elevation, terrain and configuration.

Figure 1: SatCOW

Figure 2: SatCOW

NBN Road Muster trucks: These are vehicles equipped with an NBN Co Sky Muster service to provide ESOs and evacuated residents with a high-speed Wi-Fi connection. The trucks can display important community updates and information on an external screen and play emergency radio broadcasts over it's speaker. They can also serve as a charging station for phones and other portable devices.

Figure 3: NBN Co Road Muster truck

NBN Co Fly Away kits: These portable units neatly packed into cases that can be delivered by light plane to remote locations across the nation, to provide access to high speed broadband.

Figure 4: NBN Co Fly Away kit