



High Speed Down Under

Australia invests in a multibillion-dollar national broadband network

AN AUSTRALIAN national broadband network began as a 2007 election campaign promise. Liberal party Senator Helen Coonan, then communications minister, said it couldn't be done. The Labor party's telecom expert, Senator Stephen Conroy, thought otherwise. Now that Conroy's party is in the majority, he's taken over as communications minister, and Australia plans to invest AUS \$4.7 billion (US \$3.1 billion) in a national network. After numerous delays and worry that the government would not follow through, the project seems to be on track—

telecommunication companies vying for the job are to submit their proposals by 26 November. The government plans to pick a winner in early 2009.

The Australian plan calls for a fiber-optic network. But because of costs and practicality, analysts say, it will likely include a mix of fiber, WiMax wireless systems, and satellite services. How much of each nonfiber technology the government will go for is the big question that bidders are struggling with.

Building a national broadband network is a daunting task for any country, but particularly for

Australia. The combination of a large land mass (slightly smaller than the contiguous United States) and low population density—just 2.7 people per square kilometer—make broadband infrastructure both a technological and economic challenge. Serving Australia's scattered coastal cities—where 85 percent of the population lives—is one thing, but bringing broadband to the outback, where people often live kilometers from one another and hundreds of kilometers from the nearest city, is quite another.

The national network must deliver broadband to 98 percent of the population at a download speed of 12 megabits per second. Those targets might be hard to meet, given Australia's current average speed of 1.7 Mb/s and a

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Australia's broadband scheme must cover a sparsely populated continent.
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