This is an archived page. Report a problem

The New York Times

Bits
Business, Innovation, Technology, Society

The Future of Broadband — in Tasmania

By Steve Lohr August 4, 2010 11:05 am

Mention Tasmania, the island 150 miles south of the Australian mainland, and most people, if they think of anything at all, think of a carnivorous marsupial, the Tasmanian Devil.

But Tasmania is leading Australia's ambitious broadband plan to wire more than 90 percent of the nation's homes with high-speed fiber optics. Today, South Korea and Japan are the leaders in putting fiber networks in homes, with about 40 percent penetration.

The first three communities in Tasmania started getting fiber-to-the-home technology last month, with data speeds starting at 100 megabits per second, or 20 times faster than typical broadband speeds today.

By 2013, Tasmania plans to have the hyper-speed broadband available to nearly all its 500,000 citizens — and the government is installing it without charging the users. The plan is for the rollout to be completed throughout Australia five to seven years.

Larry Smarr, a director of California Institute for Telecommunications and Information Technology, calls the Australian policy "one of the most interesting experiments in the world."

The Australian government, according to Mr. Smarr, a professor at the University of California, San Diego, sees the "importance of broadband as part of a nation-building exercise, unlike this country."

David Bartlett, the premier of Tasmania, certainly regards high-speed broadband as an engine of economic development for his Australian state. Mr. Bartlett was traveling through the United States recently, meeting with major American technology companies, including Microsoft, Google, Apple, Cisco, I.B.M. and Hewlett-Packard.

His pitch: Tasmania offers high-tech innovators a "planetary laboratory" for developing and trying out high-speed broadband applications in fields like health care, education and energy management.

Yet Australia and Tasmania also point to the bumps in the road toward the broadband future. In the first three communities, households are not rushing to get the fiber installed. About half so far have granted permission, apparently concerned about wiring hassles and the uncertain cost of high-speed services.

The government's plan for its high-speed National Broadband Network has also become a point of sharp debate in the run-up to Australia's national election on Aug. 21.

The opposition center-right Liberal-National coalition has declared that, if elected, it will jettison the national fiber-optic rollout, estimated to cost 43 billion Australian dollars (about $39 billion) over several years. A similar program if done in the United States, based on dollars spent per person, would cost nearly $700 billion.

The opposition contends that a less-expensive mix of wireless and broadband technologies can yield comparable economic benefits at far less cost than the ruling Labor Party's plan.

"We make no apology for not matching Labor's monumentally reckless spending in this regard," Tony Smith, an opposition spokesman, recently told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation.

Prime Minister Julia Gillard said her opponents would consign the nation's economy, school children and health system to second-class citizenship in the high-tech economy of the future.

"The choice today couldn't be clearer: I will build the National Broadband Network," Ms. Gillard said, as quoted by the Associated Press. "The opposition will not."

© 2017 The New York Times Company

Limit the Use of My Sensitive Information California Notices

Limit the Use of My Sensitive Information California Notices