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WiMAX, shared DSLAMS to support new backhaul links?

Fixed-line ISPs are considering new WiMAX builds and could potentially share infrastructure in small towns as government-subsidised backhaul links to regional Australia are built. While access-seeker ISPs universally applauded the federal government's \$250m tender for six new fibre transmission routes, carriers are holding out on investment commitments until a business case is assured.

Adam Internet MD Scott Hicks (right) said WiMAX may actually be a more effective technology in many of the areas opened up by new links. In sparsely populated areas, "WiMAX towers could be more feasible [than DSLAMs]," Hicks said. "Most of the copper out there could be up to 40-50 years old and could be decaying... we'll go where it's economically viable."



"Backhaul has always been the main issue holding back further DSLAM rollouts, particularly once you get outside metro areas our ability to deliver ADSL2+ has been limited basically by the lack of availability of suitable backhaul," Netspace regulatory director Matthew Phillips told CommsDay – but said actual deployments "will take some more scrutiny."

Primus CEO Ravi Bhatia (right) said he wanted to see which exchanges would be covered by the new links. "I think the benefit of the announcement will go beyond consumer internet – we use our DSLAM infrastructure [for business services]... It's going to be a brand new ball game for all that."



On the day of the announcement, Competitive Carriers Coalition chairman Matt Healy said operators could potentially cut costs by sharing DSLAMs in regional areas, but operators are wary of operational issues from common infrastructure. Bhatia said OSS and BSS issues could arise, saying the option was "not out of the question but needs to be studied."

"These things have been mooted before – there's always a lot of difficulty bringing people who are competitors together," Phillips said. Adam Internet's Hicks said DSLAM sharing was "certainly a good idea, but I don't know if anyone would do it."

iiNet CTO Greg Bader said the carrier was already looking into new regional builds which may now directly benefit from the competing links. "We're actually looking to go into a few regional areas... what we don't know yet is the cost of backhaul and the timing of it," he said. While Bader said there were no technical issues with sharing DSLAM infrastructure it could be tricky to implement with individual carrier systems. "One thing we've struggled with... is trying to give customers a consistent view of the world... the challenge with using a Telstra or Optus DSLAM is you don't have that capability – you could end up with a dogs dinner of different capabilities and products."

Luke Coleman