

New hope for Hawaiki or Bluesky cable after Pacific Island leaders meet in Auckland

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The Cook Islands is one of the Pacific nations crying out for a new submarine cable connection.

New Zealand and Pacific Island governments have agreed to work to ensure a new submarine cable is laid across the Pacific, after meeting in Auckland.

The intervention makes it more likely that one of the two existing plans to lay a new cable to and from New Zealand will succeed, according to a Cook Islands minister.

Internet access in the Pacific is expensive and limited. For example, the Cook Islands relies entirely on expensive satellite communications to carry phone calls and internet traffic, Cook Islands finance minister Mark Brown said.

A "standard" broadband plan in the Cook Islands costing \$49 a month comes with a meagre 6 gigabyte data cap – and with 100 millisecond lag, business is stifled and video-gaming has yet to take off.

Representatives from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade (MFAT) met with delegations from the Cook Islands, Niue, Tokelau and French Polynesia on Thursday to discuss improving internet connectivity in the region.

The ministry has since issued a communique saying officials would present leaders with "solutions for a submarine cable and satellite infrastructure" to improve communications for the islands by August.

New Zealand would "facilitate the planning and development phases of the project", it said.

Auckland-based Hawaiki hopes to build a \$500 million cable linking Australia and New Zealand to the United States via several Pacific Islands, but has had a series of disappointments securing the last remaining \$150m it requires.

Another firm, Spain's Bluesky, aims to build a cable from New Zealand as far as Hawaii, also connecting other islands en route – including American Samoa where it has a subsidiary business.

Brown said representatives from private companies Hawaiki Cable and Bluesky attended the Auckland meeting and it seemed they had the most viable options to improve internet access in the region.

Brown said the New Zealand government had indicated it would contribute financially and he was thankful for that.

MFAT would not detail what if any funding was under consideration.

The Cook Islands would also chip in, Brown said.

"We could look at equity stakeholders who may want to invest in the cable and we have the ability to borrow through our financiers such as the Asian Development Bank.

"Looking to the future, it is inevitable that we need to invest in cable."

Broadband and mobile phone penetration in the Cook Islands, which has a population of 10,900, was very high, Brown said. But the cost and lag associated with satellite communications meant there was a limit to what people could use broadband for, he added.

"It is stifling business, particularly in the finance sector.

"The latency and the cost means things [like video gaming] doesn't really take place over here," Brown said.

He was "very optimistic" the agreement signed in Auckland would result in a new cable being laid within three years.

Hawaiki chief executive Remi Galasso said its proposed cable would be a cost-effective way to bring ultrafast broadband to Tokelau, Niue and the Cook Islands and would make internet data 10 times cheaper than it was now.

"We have presented the advantages of our technical proposal to both MFAT and Pacific islands leaders. Hawaiki will be able to carry their international traffic to ... New Zealand, Australia, Hawaii or Portland, Oregon," he said.

The MFAT communique said the governments had a shared vision of providing reliable, affordable and high-speed broadband.

"This will ensure that Pacific citizens and businesses, including those on remote islands, can benefit from planned initiatives such as telemedicine and digital education solutions," it said.

The Samoan government and the Asian Development Bank also participated in the Auckland meeting, MFAT said. Brown said Southern Cross Cable also made presentation.

Source:

<http://www.stuff.co.nz/business/industries/76720771/New-hope-for-Hawaiki-or-Bluesky-cable-after-Pacific-Island-leaders-meet-in-Auckland>