

Senate Standing Committee on Environment and Communications

Answers to Senate Estimates Questions on Notice

Additional Estimates Hearings February 2014

Communications Portfolio

NBN Co Limited

Question No: 92

Program No. NBN Co Limited

Hansard Ref: In Writing

Topic: Duct Clearing Technology

Senator Urquhart asked:

At the hearing (Page 73) Dr Switkowski was asked by Senator Ludlum “We took evidence in Perth a couple of weeks ago in the select committee, including from a company that has been engaged, I believe, by some of your subcontractors to make much greater use of Telstra’s existing network of pits and ducts. It is a technology that effectively involves just blowing pressurised water through the ducts so that they can be more easily reused. Are you familiar with that company or that technology?” Dr Switkowski advised that he was only aware of it to the extent of media reports, that it had been labelled micro-trenching technology and that he “had a chat with people in the technology group. They were, firstly, familiar with the technology and were curious but not moved to immediately trial it.”

- a. As Senator Ludlum was clearly asking about duct clearing technology why did Dr Switkowski refer to it as “micro-trenching technology”?
- b. Minister Turnbull referred to it as “micro-trenching technology” in a speech to the House of Representatives on 11 February. Did anybody from NBN Co seek to provide advice to the Minister that this is a duct clearing technology not a micro-trenching technology?
- c. In ZDNet following an exclusive interview with Dr Switkowski on 21 February (four days before Estimates) Josh Taylor wrote “A spokesperson for NBN Co indicated that the company is already using a duct remediation technology recently floated by a Western Australian contractor that would reduce the cost of deploying fibre in the network, and Switkowski said NBN Co is open to any new innovations to reduce the cost of building the network.” Which statement is correct, the one by Dr Switkowski that NBN Co was “not moved it immediately trial it” or the one by the spokesperson that “NBN Co is “already using” the technology?

Answer:

- a. As indicated in testimony, Dr Switkowski had read media reports in which there was some coverage of new innovations and techniques. From this coverage, Dr Switkowski had understood the topic question to be innovation related to the technique of micro-trenching. Please see also answer to part b.
- b. No.
- c. Both statements are correct, please see clarification point in answer to part (a) above concerning the genesis of Dr Switkowski’s comments.
Duct Flushing is common industry practice and has already been in use throughout the build of the NBN. Contractors adapt their own techniques depending on the specific infrastructure conditions and a variety of methods is used.

In one of the media reports discussing duct flushing technology, Telstra confirmed the use of a high-pressure water system in areas of its network where pit and pipe blockages were tough to clear, but denied it was innovative to use it in the communications sector.