

Rolling out self-help wifi project

by Janna Sherman and Laura Mills

A DIY broadband initiative set up in Bruce Bay to tap into unused fibre optic signal from schools, is now being rolled out in Hokitika.

On Friday, Bruce Bay will get wifi broadband in a self-help joint project started early last year between WestREAP and local iwi Te Runanga o Makaawhio.

The project involves tapping into the unused portion of fibre optic signal at Fox Glacier School and beaming it by repeaters to Bruce Bay, 50km away.

Rather than costing millions of dollars, it cost only a five-figure sum but delivers a city-quality broadband.

When it is officially switched on, residents who had been paying up to \$500 a month for satellite broadband with capped data, will have unlimited fast broadband for just \$40 a month.

It will be available to 54 households in a sparsely populated area stretching south from Fox Glacier, bringing the world wide web into homes at Karangarua, Manakaiaua, Hunts Beach, Jacobs River, Bruce Bay and the Mahitahi Valley.

The same scheme will be extended to Haast and will also be repeated from Westland High School in Hokitika to the outlying townships of Awatuna and Arahura.

The North Island company Wifi Connect was working at Westland High yesterday to plan the installation of repeaters that will take the broadband to settlements north of Hokitika.

WestREAP team leader for adult

and community education Cheryl Smeaton, said the Hokitika part of the project would cover Arahura and the Awatuna Valley to include homes which currently did not have access to broadband through fibre.

It was expected to be up and running within a month.

"Anyone within sight of the high site at Mount French will have access to unlimited wifi internet," Ms Smeaton said.

"This work is only possible through the Ministry of Education school network upgrade programme, which gave schools the ability to become network hubs for the community. "The initiative was completed in 2016."

The project started early last year when Ms Smeaton worked together with the Makaawhio Runanga, which was looking at alternative ways to get broadband into Te Tauraka Waka a Maui Marae, at Bruce Bay.

WestREAP staff knew of Wifi Connect Ltd, a small internet company from the isolated Maori community of Tokomaru Bay on the East Coast, and by working closely with Makaawhio and the Department of Conservation over some months came up with a workable plan. In September they applied and were granted funding from Internet NZ.

Ms Smeaton said a wifi to mobile cellular network connection was also possible, with WiFi Connect working with Vodafone to include a device as part of the broadband package.

PICTURE: Janna Sherman

Cheryl Smeaton, from WestREAP and Wifi Connect Ltd co-director Ivan Lomax with the antenna that works alongside transmitters such as the one pictured at Westland High School, rear, to bring broadband blackspots in parts of north Hokitika and Bruce Bay.



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