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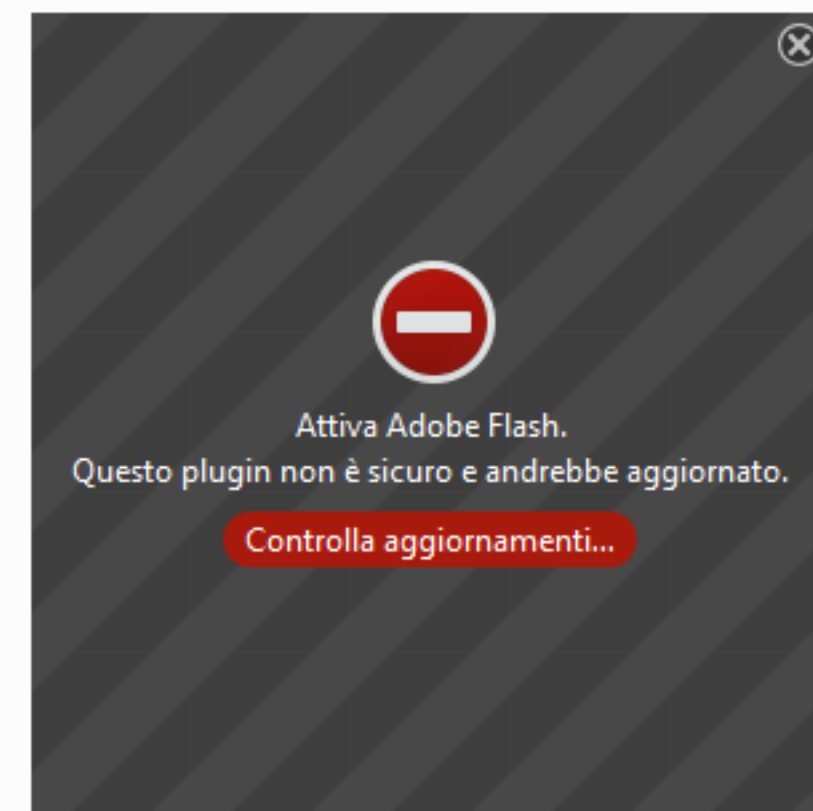
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SABER CALLS FOR "THINK GLOBAL, ACT LOCAL" APPROACH TO SOLVING THE EUROPEAN DIGITAL DIVIDE

October 2, 2014 News 0 Comments

EU coordinated and regionally implemented Satellite Broadband Voucher Scheme could assist up to 6 million houses across Europe to get connected, says Satellite Broadband for European Regions network (SABER)

The SABER Project called upon the members of the EU and their regional governments to implement co-ordinated Regional Voucher Schemes to encourage awareness and take-up of satellite broadband solutions to cut the Digital Divide across Europe's most rural regions. According to June 2014 Digital Agenda Scoreboard up to 6 million EU houses are still without access to fixed broadband services, despite satellite broadband availability in all EU countries. Voucher Schemes are administered by regional authorities and use publicly available funds to underwrite the hardware and/or installation costs of broadband solutions.

The rallying call to action was made at the final conference of the two-year SABER Project, an EU-funded Thematic Network. At the Brussels conference titled "Broadband for European Regions, from availability to penetration: the satellite contribution", SABER brought together representatives from 21 European regional authorities, satellite experts and key influencers to examine how to accelerate broadband adoption in rural areas.

With official patronage from the Italian Presidency of the Council of the European Union, high level speakers attending the event included Mercedes Bresso, MEP and former President of Region Piedmont and former President of the Committee of Regions; Michel Lebrun, current President of the Committee of Regions; Michel de Rosen, Eutelsat Chairman and CEO and Chairman of the European Satellite Operators Association (ESOA); Eric Béranger, Head of Space Systems Programs / Airbus Defence and Space (formerly Astrium) and Gerson Souto, Chief Development Officer, SES.

"The SABER membership has achieved much in a relatively short space of time by helping to raise awareness of the capabilities of satellite broadband to immediately bridge the European Digital Divide and to share knowledge of good practices, and this to the benefit of the European regions: an excellent starting point for future implementation" said Davide Zappalà, President of CSI-Piemonte.

"Satellite broadband is a practical and viable solution today. However there are still two major barriers in the EU to the faster adoption of this technology. The first is the inadequacy of the European Union policy to drive awareness, acceptance and adoption of satellite technology, which was successfully achieved in North America and Australia. The second is the fragmented management of public funds to address the issue between the European Commission, the Member States and the regions" said Michel de Rosen, Chairman of ESOA, speaking on behalf of satellite operators.

The conference suggested the adoption of a Voucher Scheme with an EU or national framework to work as an overarching programme with regional implementation, administration and delivery. This "Think global, act local" approach would be more effective in raising awareness of the satellite broadband solution and more efficient to administer.

Voucher schemes, such as those in Galicia in Spain, Piedmont in Italy and Eure-et-Loir in France, have already proven effective at overcoming the barriers of upfront hardware and connection costs and the challenges of how to deploy public funds effectively. With these schemes, residents in Digital Divide areas are entitled to a voucher covering the cost of the satellite technology and/or installation. This voucher can be used with a range of competitive suppliers, ensuring market competition. In relation to the voucher scheme, SABER called for the EU to promote the eligibility of satellite terminals and services to European Regional Development Fund, in particular through the formal confirmation that solutions with predicted path towards 30 Mbps by 2020 are entitled to public support.

Alongside the role of an EU coordinated Voucher Scheme, the conference also examined the role of satellite broadband in regional strategies and the future speed requirements of satellite broadband solutions to continue to meet the needs of EU residents.

Led by CSI-Piemonte, the 24-month SABER project is partially EU-funded and involves 26 partners including Eutelsat, SES Broadband Services, Airbus Defence and Space and 21 regional authorities and ICT public and private organisations supporting regions in broadband deployment representing 13 countries.

During its lifespan, the SABER project has published important, practical information, guidelines and toolkits (some available in several languages) to help national and regional governments close the European Digital Divide by using satellite broadband technology.

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