

Australian Broadcasting Corporation

submission to

**Senate Environment and Communications
Legislation Committee**

**ABC news services in
rural and regional Australia**

March 2013



ABC submission to the Senate Environment and Communications Legislation Committee on ABC news services in rural and regional Australia

March 2013

Introduction

The ABC welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Committee's inquiry into the provisions of the Broadcasting Services Amendment (Material of Local Significance) Bill 2013 and "the delivery of news coverage in rural and regional areas by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation."

The ABC has an enduring relationship with rural and regional communities and an unrivalled commitment to providing news and information for and from regional Australia. The Corporation views its services to regional communities as integral to meeting its Charter obligation to "reflect the cultural diversity of the Australian community".¹

The ABC notes that the Broadcasting Services Amendment (Material of Local Significance) Bill 2013 relates to the licence conditions applying to commercial free-to-air television broadcasters operating in regional areas. It has no application to the Corporation, which accordingly does not intend to comment on that Bill. Instead, it will confine its comments to the Committee's request for information on ABC news services in rural and regional Australia.

The Corporation also notes that in January 2013 it provided an extensive description of its regional activities, including its news services, in a submission to the Senate Environment and Communications References Committee inquiry into the ABC's commitment to reflecting and representing regional diversity. It commends that submission to the Committee as a potential further source of information that might assist its inquiry.

News and current affairs in rural and regional Australia

The ABC has a long-standing commitment to delivering news and current affairs to regional

¹ *Australian Broadcasting Corporation Act 1983 (Cth)*, s.6(1)(a)(i).

and rural Australia, and this focus has grown over time, rather than diminished – a feat which makes it unique in the Australian media landscape.

The Corporation provides all Australian communities – regional and metropolitan alike – with a wide range of news services. It provides access to local news and information via radio, and online. As the ABC's television services are distributed on a state or territory basis, it provides a nightly 7 pm television news bulletin in each state and territory and a weekly state/territory-based episode of the current affairs program 7.30. Further, all ABC audiences have access to numerous national news and current affairs programs on radio, television, online and mobile platforms, including via the dedicated 24-hour digital television news channel ABC News 24 and the recent ABC News YouTube channel. The Corporation also engages with its audiences at local, state and national levels through social media services such as Twitter and Facebook.

The ABC employs a comprehensive network of regional reporters around Australia, offering unparalleled, specialist coverage of local news and information. In an environment in which audiences can access a world of information and a truly global perspective, maintaining the ability to investigate and report at a local level has become more important than ever.

The ABC has a total of 88 reporters working in 48 regional newsrooms:

New South Wales		Shepparton	1	Gold Coast	4
Bega	2	Warrnambool	1	Longreach	1
Coffs Harbour	2	Wodonga	2	Mackay	2
Dubbo	1	Total Victoria	13	Mt Isa	1
Erina	1			Rockhampton	3
Lismore	2	South Australia		Sunshine Coast	2
Muswellbrook	1	Broken Hill	2	Toowoomba	2
Newcastle	5	Mt Gambier	1	Townsville	4
Nowra	1	Port Augusta	1	Total Queensland	25
Orange	2	Port Lincoln	1		
Port Macquarie	2	Port Pirie	2	Western Australia	
Tamworth	2	Renmark	1	Albany	1
Wagga Wagga	2	Total SA	8	Broome	2
Wollongong	2			Bunbury	2
Total NSW	25	Tasmania		Geraldton	1
		Burnie	1	Kalgoorlie	2
Victoria		Launceston	4	Karratha	1
Ballarat	2	Total Tasmania	5	Total WA	9
Bendigo	2				
Horsham	1	Queensland		Northern Territory	
Mildura	1	Bundaberg	2	Alice Springs	3
Morwell	1	Cairns	3	Total NT	3
Sale	2	Gladstone	1		

These journalists provide regular local radio news in their respective regions, as well as gathering, writing and producing audio, video and text content about regional events for

inclusion in state and national programs and bulletins.

Overall, the ABC provides more than 3,400 hours of regional radio news bulletins across Australia each year. Journalists in regional stations provide morning, lunchtime and afternoon bulletins focused on their local communities. These are usually at 6.30 am, 7.30 am, 8.30 am, 12.30 pm and 5.30 pm. Durations vary between three and five minutes each, with most centres also providing headlines. These bulletins are also complemented by comprehensive online news services, with users able to customise the ABC news online page according to their location.

Regional reporters in the larger bureaux also contribute television news content from time to time to both state and national news programming.

In addition, the Corporation has a dedicated Rural and Regional Reporter who travels throughout the country and files stories about regional Australia.

At a higher level, the ABC maintains fully staffed and equipped local newsrooms in every state and territory capital city, providing a full suite of local radio news bulletins, local online news information, the local 7 pm news bulletin and weekly state-based current affairs program. All newsrooms regularly travel to cover major stories outside the capital cities.

The Corporation also has a dedicated weekly television current affairs program about rural and regional Australia, *Landline*, which airs weekly throughout the year. The program is produced in Brisbane.

In 2012–13, the ABC's News Division spent \$7.58 million on its network of regional news bureaux and \$2.14 million on *Landline*. These amounts don't include the rural and regional coverage delivered by travelling reporters based in metropolitan newsrooms.

Overall, no other national media organisation in the country devotes the same level of funds and resources to regional Australia, and the Corporation remain committed to increasing this expenditure, not reducing it.

To that end, as part of the additional \$10 million in News funding recently provided to the ABC by the Federal Government,² the Corporation will expand its resources in regional Australia, with a particular focus on increasing its capacity to produce video content, including live content, from the regions. These plans are currently being developed, but the ABC expects to put more video links and more cameras into a number of regional locations across the country, including multi-skilled links operators, camera/edit operators and video journalists.

ABC Local Radio

Through its 51 regional multimedia studios across the country, ABC Local Radio delivers news, information and specialist rural coverage of relevance to local communities each day, as well as emergency coverage as required.

ABC Local Radio schedules include regular News Bulletins and major current affairs programs *Early AM*, *AM*, *The World Today*, *PM* and *Saturday AM*, all produced by ABC News.

² ABC. "ABC invests in News future", Media Release, 7 February 2013. <<http://about.abc.net.au/press-releases/abc-invests-in-news-future/>>.

News and information is gathered, produced and distributed from each region in different formats and for multiple platforms—radio, online, television and mobile phones—to local, national and global audiences. This multiplatform approach significantly increases the focus and reflection of Australia’s regional diversity to wider audiences.

Further, each region is represented through an ABC Local website featuring news, information and other content from the local radio station and broader content from and about the community. The websites contain rich media content, an increasing amount of which is made available as podcasts and increased capacity for audiences to interact, collaborate and contribute their own content.

ABC Rural

Through ABC Rural, a program area within ABC Radio, the Corporation provides specific coverage of rural news and issues of local, state and national relevance on radio and online platforms. Its coverage of local rural news and issues is delivered through a number of programs. ABC Rural reporters provide daily *Rural Reports* on Local Radio in each region. In addition, they contribute local content to *The Country Hour* programs produced in each state and in the Northern Territory. *The Country Hour*, now in its 68th year, delivers rural news of national and state and/or territory relevance.

ABC Rural also produces rural news and information for broadcast on Radio National (RN), including in *Bush Telegraph* and *Country Breakfast*.

The program area comprises 67 reporters and editors, 32 of whom are located in ABC regional centres and focus on local and state-based rural news and issues; the remainder are located in Canberra and other capital cities and cover major rural news, issues and events of state/territory and national relevance.

A key strength of ABC Rural is its ability to comprehensively cover local issues in any community and represent global issues to local audiences through access to international newsmakers. ABC Rural reporters have led the field in covering major stories, including challenges for the livestock export industries, foreign investment in agriculture and competition for land from miners, including coal seam gas.

ABC Rural reporters also reflect the cultural diversity in agricultural communities and bring Indigenous voices into debates over mining and land use practices.

In 2012, ABC Rural strengthened its focus on regional news and business reporting.

The reach of rural news and information has been broadened considerably through increasing the range of rich and extensive content available online through the ABC Rural portal.

ABC Rural has is increasingly using the online environment to implement special projects in relation to key topic so interest to rural communities. These have included:

- Live Exports microsite: ABC Rural’s first data visualisation project, which incorporates interactive maps and graphic charts on the trade of Australian livestock overseas. It also aggregates coverage of the live export/animal welfare debate since the ban on live exports to Indonesia in 2011.
- Carbon Farming microsite: combines news, information and case-studies of farmers

and land managers finding their way within the Federal Government's carbon farming initiative.

- Hendra microsite: established in 2012 to cover the spread of the Hendra virus; the site has continued to be updated with fresh information and new outbreaks as they occur.
- FACETS 2012: a TEDx-style event hosted as part of the Australian Year of the Farmer. It gave 16 guest speakers 20 minutes to discuss food, agriculture, climate, energy, topsoil and sustainability. The event was streamed live via the ABC Rural website both via video and audio. The host event in Bathurst was accessed via three regional locations interstate.

In the last year ABC Rural has made a concerted effort to increase its presence on social media networks. It has also made significant efforts to build communities through initiatives such as the Australian Farmer of the Year Awards, Heywire's collaboration with the Federal Government's National Youth Think-Tank in Canberra in September and RN's *Bush Telegraph's* co-production of a live food debate at ABC Melbourne with the Federal Department of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries, to mark the Australian Year of the Farmer 2012.

ABC Rural coverage also features on Radio Australia, on ABC NewsRadio, in the major current affairs programs and on Local Radio's regional Drive programs.

Conclusion

The ABC is proud to stand on its record on delivering services to regional and rural communities across all its platforms. Within available resources, the Corporation provides the most comprehensive regional news and information service in the country.