



WELLINGTON
SHIRE COUNCIL
The Heart of Gippsland

18 February 2016

Committee Secretary
Senate Standing Committee on Environment and Communications
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Dear Sir/Madam

AUSTRALIAN BROADCASTING CORPORATION AMENDMENT (RURAL AND REGIONAL ADVOCACY) BILL 2015

Wellington Shire Council supports the proposed amendments to the *Australian Broadcasting Corporation Act 1983* by the *Australian Broadcasting Corporation Amendment (Rural and Regional Advocacy) Bill 2015*. Council encourages the Environment and Communications Committee to put the Bill to Parliament.

In regards to the proposed amendments, Wellington Shire Council provides the following feedback:

Schedule 1 – Amendments

Item 4

At the end of subsection 6(1) (d)

It is vital that the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) allocate the resources necessary to carry out the Corporation's functions and duties in rural and regional Australia.

Council agrees that local content is far more than just telling stories. Sound, pertinent content for the local area, including in times of emergency, is imperative. Given the greater distances faced by rural and regional staff, more time is required to source and cover the relevant issues.

Item 10

After Subsection 11(3)

Council commends the proposal of a biennial survey of rural and regional audiences relating to community satisfaction with the Corporation's broadcasting in rural and regional areas.

However, it seems remiss to not propose comparative surveys with other local regional broadcasters, both commercial and public. Commercial broadcasters frequently survey to determine audience share and identify methods by which to increase listenership.

Whilst it is the remit of the ABC to serve areas and demographics for which commercial companies do not provide, a holistic understanding of local market share would provide more substantial and unbiased data to guide community satisfaction and undertake service improvements.

Item 15

Subsection 27(2)

We agree with the proposed inclusion of a requirement for at least five radio bulletins consisting solely or primarily of regional or local news between 5.00am and 8.00pm, at regular intervals.

A noticeable negative impact of recent programming changes has been the decline in number of dedicated local news bulletins.

It is recognised that many residents now source online content in addition to broadcast content. However community engagement informs Council that a significantly high number of Wellington Shire residents still prefer traditional forms of communication.

In a region affected by mobile blackspots, and with an ageing demographic, it is simply not yet plausible to expect all residents to seek their own content online. The Corporation must provide greater accessible news content in rural and regional areas, as opposed to so heavily focussing on transferring greater content online.

Item 16

Section 34

Information can mean the difference between life and death to any community facing emergency. It is imperative that local ABC stations can rostered effectively in emergency broadcasting situations so that production can both ensure community safety and comply with health and safety standards.

In 2015, ABC Gippsland was recognised for 10 outstanding years supporting the Victorian community as an Emergency Broadcaster. Due to changes in staffing arrangements, the station is now unable to provide those same award winning services.

During Wellington Shire's most recent emergency events, notably the Jack River Fires in February 2014 and Whitelaws Track Fire in November 2015, the dedicated local content relied upon by our community was not provided.

For more than a decade our community has relied on the local ABC to provide comprehensive information during times of emergency. It is the station to which many of our residents automatically turn their dials. The community is used to the dedicated localised service provided, yet with no prior warning, that service was removed.

During recent events, the station has no longer provided a local service during afternoons, evenings and weekends, with cross-state emergency broadcasting now taking place from Melbourne.

This results in intermittent references to events in our local area; smaller events (yet no less critical for those impacted) receiving limited exposure; mispronunciation of place names and therefore a lack of relevant critical information to our community in times of need.

Whilst the Hazelwood mine fires received significant coverage, Jack River received almost none. Following that event, Council was advised by the impacted and at risk communities how, when used to relying on ABC Gippsland, they struggled to source vital information for the first time in many years.

Loss of localised ABC emergency broadcasting will require Council to work more closely with emergency agencies to establish new and untested methods by which to advise our communities. This on the understanding that we can no longer rely on dedicated regional informational services from a local emergency broadcaster.

Items 17 through 19

We commend the recommendations for additional reporting regarding consultation, biennial audience survey results, content changes, and regional employment data.

Wellington Shire Council recognises the valuable work of regional ABC through promoting community conversations, providing localised news services and content, debating local issues and providing essential notification of emergency service information during times of crisis including dedicated weekend and evening reporting services.

ABC Gippsland is a service that the Wellington Shire community knows and loves. Our local ABC journalists, producers and announcers strive to embed themselves within our region, they are well connected and informed, and as a result provide excellent service to our region.

Our community has recognised a change for the worse in service over recent years, through no fault of those staff who strive under great pressure from a lack of resourcing to bring relevant content, news and issues to the fore.

Council is encouraged by recent changes to the Corporation's organisational structure and programming. Whilst it is too soon to determine whether these changes, which commenced in January 2016, will provide a positive impact on services across our region, Wellington Shire Council commends the ABC for conducting and acting upon a thorough service review.

Yours sincerely

CR DARREN McCUBBIN
Mayor

Our ref: KL: KL
ECM: