



HEART OF THE CHANNEL COUNTRY

9th March 2011

Committee Secretary,
Senate Standing Committees on Environment and Communications
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Dear Secretary,

Broadcasting Legislation Amendment (Digital Dividend and Other Measures) Bill 2011 (Provisions)

I refer to the above legislation and submit issues that the Barcoo Shire sees as significant or worthwhile of further consideration or examination.

Barcoo Shire - Background.

The Barcoo Shire covers some 62,000 km² and is located in the central west of Queensland, has a total population of some 400 permanent residents and up to that amount again of travellers passing through the Shire at peak tourist season.

There are three small communities within the Shire consisting of Windorah, Jundah and Stonehenge. All of these communities rely on a Council owned and operated self-help rebroadcast service for their television viewing.

Currently the self-help site rebroadcasts the Aurora service from the Optus C1 satellite in analogue format. (These facilities are predominately serviced by trades' people / professionals from both Longreach 150 and 200 km to the north or Charleville 450 km to the east.)

Issues identified by the Barcoo Shire:

1. The Consultation Process

- We feel the consultation process to date has been less than appropriate by the Digital Switchover Taskforce. Particularly considering that the changes being proposed for many self-help television operators will have a significant effect both financially and socially on the residents, government services providers, community groups and businesses of these communities.



- It is amusing to think that any proposed significant change to television viewing reception equipment and viewer experience being legislated by a federal authority for regional and remote areas would not seek some input or advice from a recognized representative organisation (s).
- There appears to have been a Canberra centric assumption made that a DTH (direct-to-home) satellite television service would in some way be automatically accepted as a viable replacement to the current terrestrial television service.
- The February 15 to 28 time frame given by the department to self-help operators to make an informed decision on whether to opt-in to the SSS (Satellite Subsidy Scheme) was a sham and a disgrace. The clear lack of comparative DTH VAST (Viewer Access Satellite Television) versus the terrestrial rebroadcast of VAST information was placing self-help operators in a very compromising position and rendering them unable to make an informed decision on behalf of their communities.
- To date the Barcoo Shire has been visited once since the announcement of the program and that was a demonstration/information tour by three representatives from the Digital Switchover Task Force. Although the public had the chance to ask questions, no opportunities were given to have input into policy issues such as the proposed service delivery to caravan parks, hotel/motels, work camps, and community facilities such as schools, libraries and health service centres.
- As a Local Authority that currently owns and operates the self help rebroadcasting facilities , the expectations are that a consultation process would be forthcoming to seek input ,firstly from the Local Authority and secondly from the community as a whole.



2. Potential Retransmission Options

- Council continues to talk with industry experts associated with self-help digital retransmission of the new VAST services with a view to gaining information on a potential cost effectiveness alternative to a DTH satellite service delivery in our three communities. This will potentially ease the burden on the residents and the community as a whole. Council is also examining the ongoing impacts on the community after the rollout. Options which will give the public better service and support in the future are major considerations and a concern of council. The Government has seen fit to compress the time lines for Councils' to make informed decisions on potential switchover options together with restricting access to the VAST system to undertake such trials in the rebroadcasting field.

3. Impact on Tourism

- The Barcoo Shire is striving to increase its share of the ever increasing self drive tourist market and shutting down the three self help retransmission facilities within the Shire will put these tourists and local tourism providers/operators at a significant disadvantage. Add this to the lack of metro comparable internet services and no terrestrial mobile phone reception in these communities, the potential for attracting and extending the stays of many self drive tourists are significantly impaired once again in the Barcoo Shire area.

4. Limitations of satellite set top boxes

- Due to the fact that the average household has at least three televisions, it is seen as discriminatory that a remote community household will need to purchase a set top box per television set. The current satellite set top boxes do not allow for more than one television connection per satellite STB (set-top-box). This will restrict flexibility within the lower income households and basically force all satellite connected households an extra financial burden than that of their cousins which receive a free-to-air terrestrial service.



5. The Proposed Subsidy to existing Residents

- The current subsidy will only apply to existing households - the impost on new residents moving to these community will see these people pay more once again than their terrestrial serviced cousins (funded by Government)
- There has been no provision in the SSS for the passing of ownership or occupancy for public and privately owned rental accommodation and the sale private housing. Whereas the next tenant / owner may or may-not have to purchase unsubsidized DTH satellite reception equipment. This is totally dependent on the whim of the previous occupier whether they choose to remove the DTH equipment from the dwelling.
- All Australians will need to purchase either a digital-ready television or set-to-box however rural and remote self help communities where DTH television is proposed the consumer will not only need to purchase a new television to view the new widescreen aspect ratio, they will also need to purchase a STB, a satellite dish and associated wiring for their residence (and potentially one for each television in the house). Having in mind that current houses are wired to an antenna system for a terrestrial television service.

While Barcoo Shire have some identified issues with the delivery and policy around the digital switchover of television services in rural and remote locations that rely on self-help sites. We would like to acknowledge and compliment the excellent work completed by the Department of Broadband, Communications and Digital Economy and the Minister responsible, Senator Stephen Conroy on the development of the VAST service.

The development of VAST is a major and much needed improvement to the television content available in many rural and remote locations, and I am sure with a little thought and constructive dialogue we can get this move to the next generation of television services into a more workable and fair public policy for the communities affected most.

Yours faithfully

Robert J O'Brien
Chief Executive Officer