



NORTHERN TERRITORY CATTLEMEN'S ASSOCIATION INC.

Advancing and protecting the interests of cattle producers in the Northern Territory

Member - National Farmers' Federation & Cattle Council of Australia

February 2017

Reintroduction of shortwave radio service to regional Northern Territory

Northern Territory Cattlemen's Association (NTCA) submission to the Senate Standing Committees on Environment and Communications, Australian Broadcasting Corporation Amendment (Rural and Regional Advocacy) Bill 2015

With very short notice and no consultation, the ABC ceased its shortwave transmission service to the Northern Territory on 31 January 2017. The NTCA strongly believes this decision was neither rational nor informed. It was made without any form of consultation with affected communities. It was made without an objective assessment of the impact the decision was to have on these communities. It was made without any survey to quantify just how many people used the service, and what value the service afforded these people. Furthermore, the decision was inconsistent with, and a clear breach of the ABC's charter to 'provide within Australia innovative and comprehensive broadcasting services of a high standard as part of the Australian broadcasting system consisting of national, commercial and community sectors'.

Cancellation of the service has proven to be neither comprehensive nor innovative, and a complete removal from a national or community-based broadcasting system. It is an unjust and dishonest policy of exclusion and discrimination against remote and regional Australians.

The NTCA calls on the ABC to immediately reverse this decision, restore the service and retain the service until a replacement is made available that is affordable and easily accessible in all regions of the NT.

Ceasing the shortwave service in the NT does not create a saving for the taxpayer. The NTCA understands the funding previously used for the shortwave service will be diverted to improving digital radio in large urban centres. This effectively gives those in urban areas additional radio listening options to those already available, while many regional areas of the NT have only one option – shortwave or nothing.

A valuable service has been withdrawn with no consultation and no reasonable or effective alternative provided. This is a continuation of unjust treatment for those in regional Australia. We already face serious challenges in accessing internet services most Australians take for granted. In the world of internet access, regional Australian are too often second class citizens. Another example of the shabby treatment of those in the bush was the widely unpopular 2015 shutdown of the Bureau of Meteorology (BOM) Tennant Creek weather radar. This was done with one week's notice given to the affected community.

It is understood the cost of the shortwave service over the next five years would have been between \$1.5 million and \$1.9 million – or around \$350 000 per year. The return on this relatively small amount, in terms of providing 'comprehensive broadcasting services' in line with the ABC charter, was enormous.

The NTCA questions the legitimacy of 4 weeks' notice provided to the community and the fact that this spanned the Christmas period and views it as a blatant contradiction to the consideration the ABC publically claims it affords rural



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and regional Australia¹. In fact, the entire policy reflects a complete disregard for the welfare and interests of the Australian community, which ABC is supposed to serve and represent. This is not only disappointing but seems dishonest and therefore in need of urgent reassessment. It is not unusual for poorly thought out and potentially unpopular decisions to be announced in such a way. The NTCA believes this was done to stifle opposition which the ABC knew would be strong and credible. What could possibly be popular about withdrawing a well-used and highly valued service in favour of boosting services to an urban audience already spoiled for choice in terms of easily accessible media options?

Not only did the service provide entertainment and education for people living and working in some of Australia's most remote locations, it was invaluable in serving as an early warning service for potential natural disasters such as cyclones, flooding and bushfires.

It is not only NT pastoralists who have been inconvenienced and, in some situations, even endangered. Tourists, residents of Indigenous communities and those in the fishing, construction and transport industries were similarly affected.

An important consideration is the mental health of people in the bush. Farmers are 2.2 times more likely to die by suicide than the general employed public². Many people in rural and remote Australia are socially isolated, with less face-to-face contact with family, friends and other support networks. This can lead to loneliness and depression, and can contribute to suicidal behavior³. Stimulation provided by shortwave radio to those doing important jobs in isolated areas is critical. It is already difficult to attract and retain workers in the cattle industry. Quality of life is an important attractant. Developing the north is a key Australian Government policy direction. Withdrawal of a service that made it easier to attract and retain workers is clearly inconsistent with this direction.

The shortsightedness of this decision has not only alarmed the NTCA. There is bipartisan political support to reverse the move. NT Members of the Senate and House of Representatives and the NT Government are among those who oppose the withdrawal of the service.

Much of the ABC's defence of its decision is based on the existence of Viewer Access Satellite Television (VAST). However, this rings hollow. VAST is not a comprehensive substitute for shortwave radio because it is immobile and only covers a fraction of where people work and make their living.

Regional Territorians are well aware of its limitations. VAST is only effective close to the receiver. Sometimes it only works in specific locations within a dwelling, and it drops out when it rains. The very nature of working the land demands a lot of time outside – often for extended periods.

For example, pastoralists, grader operators and fencing contractors routinely spend extended periods in the bush, as do tourists. The loss of shortwave radio has been a serious loss to people who are crucial to the economy.

The NTCA contends the ABC has seriously underestimated the number of people adversely affected by the withdrawal of shortwave radio. It would appear the ABC made the decision under the quite flawed premise that few would be

¹ ABC Statement 31st January 2017

"The ABC is deeply committed to rural and regional Australia and the one-third of Australians who live outside the capital cities".

² <http://ruralhealth.org.au/sites/default/files/publications/fact-sheet-mental-health-2016.pdf>

³ <http://www.livingisforeveryone.com.au/uploads/docs/LIFE-Fact%20sheet%202018.pdf>

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inconvenienced and that few would even notice. The NTCA disputes the ABC's assertion that the audience would be 'in the hundreds' however even if it was, it still does not justify removal of a service that covers the whole of land area of the NT, unlike any other radio service.

An NTCA survey found that 92% of respondents were affected by the withdrawal of services. A survey of all of those who lost the service, within and outside the cattle industry, would yield a similar proportion affected. This is the very evidence base the ABC should have examined in considering shortwave's future.

The NTCA considers the ABC's media release of 6 December 2016 'ABC Exits Shortwave Radio Transmission' a somewhat facile defence that warrants closer inspection.

In the release Michael Mason, ABC's Director of Radio, stated, 'while shortwave radio has served audiences well for many decades, it's now nearly a century old and serves a very limited audience. The ABC is seeking efficiencies and will instead service this audience through modern technology'.

This remark does not stand up to scrutiny:

- the usefulness of shortwave radio is referred to in the past tense. It was still useful until it was switched off. Did Mr Mason check shortwave's level of utility?
- the internal combustion engine is over a century old. Like shortwave it too will be phased out but not until a reasonable and affordable replacement is widely available.
- how 'limited' is the audience – can Mr Mason provide some numbers?
- presumably VAST is the 'modern technology' referred to. In the quite common situation of people being away from the VAST service how will the ABC 'service this audience with modern technology'? This goes to the very heart of the issue. If this 'modern technology' were available users would have gladly embraced it. It's not available in vast swathes of the NT. VAST's major limitation is that it's not mobile.
- FM and AM radio have quite limited footprints in the NT. A map of NT with and without shortwave is a study in contrast. Many thousands of square kilometres were left with nothing.

Mr Mason states that the ABC is planning to extend digital radio so more people in Australia's larger population centres can access digital radio. This is as irrelevant to shortwave users as it is discriminatory. To compound the insult, it is believed the relatively minor savings from axing shortwave radio will go toward improvements to digital radio in cities.

Similarly, ABC media releases of 30 and 31 January 2017 largely, and presumably deliberately, miss the point. One media release does acknowledge that a 'small' audience 'favour shortwave radio' as if there is a small group with a range of options. This is disingenuous in that the ABC knows full well there are no viable options for this audience.



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Provision of an 'information awareness program after 31 January 2017' is inadequate and insulting. We are fully aware a valuable service has been withdrawn with no adequate replacement. The ABC pledges to 'assist with the transition to new technologies'. There is no new technology that replaces shortwave coverage.

Recommendations:

The NTCA urges the ABC to:

1. immediately restore its shortwave service to the Northern Territory
2. before changing levels of service, survey regional listeners to get reliable information on the value of regional services and use this information to inform decisions
3. build a regional services management plan into its charter that mandates minimum levels of service to all of regional Australia
4. establish a truly representative Rural and Regional Advisory Council to advise the ABC Board
5. publicly release the information that was provided to the ABC Board that precipitated the removal of shortwave radio in the NT.