



ABC Friends National - Submission to the Australian Broadcasting Corporation Amendment (Restoring Shortwave Radio) Bill 2017.

ABC Friends National Inc. represents State and Territory ABC Friends organisations around the country. ABC Friends National co-ordinates lobbying and national campaigns, particularly at election time or when the ABC is under threat. At the same time, ABC Friends continues to prod the ABC to do better in both the range and quality of the programs and services it provides.

State committees of ABC Friends keep in close contact with the many thousands of people who support the ABC as a politically independent organisation which must be properly funded if it is to fulfil its Charter and serve all Australians.

On Dec 6th last year the ABC announced it would end its shortwave radio service in the NT on 31st January 2017. Shortwave transmissions from Alice Springs, Tennant Creek and Katherine were turned off. These transmissions have been referred to as the “HF Shower” because they bounce off the ionosphere and shower back to Earth covering a huge area. The “HF shower” was received from the mid 1980’s throughout the Kimberley, in northern SA as well as throughout the Territory and into western Queensland.

Many people living and working in diverse situations have been affected by the closure of the “HF Shower”, these include: outback travellers, people on cattle stations, tourism operators, Aboriginal rangers, road construction workers, travelling tradesmen, truckies, those working in stock camps and on cattle stations and residents of remote Indigenous communities. They no longer get, via ABC radio: news, weather information, emergency warnings or content for entertainment from a radio that could fit in the hand, costing between \$80 and \$140. These people (as per the Charter) have a right to demand a service from the national public broadcaster, especially in times of trauma, but also for pure entertainment and communication.

The South Pacific shortwave (HF) service too was closed down. It was broadcast from a centre near Darwin and it was a significant lifeline to Pacific nations. People in the Solomon Islands, PNG, Vanuatu and Fiji, listened to Radio Australia to get their world information and emergency information. The Prime Minister of the Cook Islands, Henry Puna, and Vanuatu’s Trade Commissioner to Australia, Donald Pelam, both made calls for the shortwave service not to be cut.

The ABC confirmed that it had no “data” re usage of this service and that one of the indicators to close the service was the response to a “test switch off to gauge impact”. This is hardly giving users a chance to have any input into the decision. The ABC said that the Foreign Minister’s office was fully briefed about the closure and that Minister Julie Bishop supported the decision. At the time of the announcement of the closure, Ms Bishop was in the Solomon Islands on a Pacific regional trip and tweeted a video of herself stating “The pacific (sic), our neighbourhood, our priority”.¹

The ABC published transitional arrangements for users of the NT “HF Shower” in late January to moderate opposition to its decision. These made reference to AM/FM reception, VAST (Viewer Access Satellite Television) and NBN’s SkyMuster Satellite Service, podcasts and on-demand radio, streaming via mobile phone reception, access to NT website for emergency information and 2 way shortwave radio. Reliable and knowledgeable residents in the NT have contacted ABC Friends National to say that these arrangements are not viable alternatives to the HF Shower in remote, mobile contexts. Appendix 1 explains why this is so in each case.

/2 ...

¹ <http://www.sbs.com.au/news/article/2016/12/22/bishop-presses-abc-pacific-concerns-over-shortwave-radio-cut>



ABC Friends National has had contact with a former ABC Manager in Remote Area Broadcasting. He reports that in the 80's when the HF Shower was set up, it was set up when moving towards satellite-delivered services. There was an argument that it would be surpassed by satellite, but this has proven to be false. The HF Shower is still essential to the provision of communication services to communities not qualifying for satellite reception facilities and especially to those who are transient. The "HF Shower" service provides a safety net for those in remote areas. The ABC has sought to position itself as the preferred service for the delivery of cyclone, fire and flood emergency information. Signs across Australia tell travellers to tune into local ABC radio for emergency information. Signs across Australia tell travellers to tune into local ABC radio for emergency information. If the ABC is indeed the preferred service, then it needs to be sure that its transmitters can reach all Australians and not simply those living in urban areas or those serviced by satellite. There remains no suitable mobile satellite service and this was the very premise upon which the "HF Shower" was promulgated.²

Upon investigation by ABC Friends National several things are clear. Neither ABC Management nor its Board consulted with its own Territory based staff or local communications experts who could have flagged some of the far-reaching impacts of this decision. The decision to end the Short Wave Service was made in December and scheduled for the end of the January holiday period, a difficult period for the "message" to get out and for people to act. Before closure, the ABC did not consult users of shortwave services or attempt to liaise with Territory and Federal Governments about possible alternatives or more gradual change. It was stated by Michelle Guthrie that only 15 people³ raised concerns directly with the ABC when in fact 20 of the 52 submissions to the Senate Inquiry Committee investigating ABC Rural and Regional Services focussed on the Short Wave Service, some of these 20, representing groups. Furthermore, when NT Parliamentarians indicate their concern, they are representative of a large constituency. See eye witness account, Senate Inquiry Darwin 9 March, from one of our members, David Hewitt Appendix 2.

The same former ABC Manager in Remote Area Broadcasting and responsible for the ABC's input to the development of Indigenous broadcasting told us that:

"Over a period of eight years I was in constant contact through personal visits to many remote Indigenous communities in the Kimberley, Pilbara, Northern Territory, (and) Torres Strait. It was clear that these communities would NEVER raise a complaint about threats such as the loss of the HF Shower. In the first place they would not understand that it would be possible to raise a complaint and then, given that English is their second, third or even fourth language, they would not know how to go about it. The need to consult with these communities should be obvious and the manner of consultation is complex".⁴

ABC management said that "*when there was a break in transmission late last year, the response was negligible*". Management used this as evidence that few were affected by the closure of the HF Shower.⁵ However, we understand from communication with staff in Darwin that there was a failure in the Katherine transmitter for 3 weeks and listeners around that area were still able to receive radio programs through Tennant Creek, 700km away.

/3 ...

² Mr Grahame Steele, Former ABC Manager in Remote Area Broadcasting (pers com).

³ Senate Estimates Environment and Communications Legislation Tues 28 Feb 2017

⁴ Mr Grahame Steele, Former ABC Manager in Remote Area Broadcasting (pers com).

⁵ Senate Estimates Environment and Communications Legislation Tues 28 February 2017



The ABC decision was made on a cost benefit analysis with savings in funds reallocated to upgrade digital services in Darwin, Perth and Hobart at the expense of the shortwave service.⁶

The decision-making process used by ABC Management and its Board has been made in isolation reflecting a total ignorance of the reality of communication in rural and remote Australia and demonstrates the problem of Sydney-centric decision making.

ABC Friends National urged ABC Management to delay the closure to allow time for research and discussion about the impact of ending the shortwave service, and to liaise with government about alternatives. We acknowledge the impacts of recent major funding cutbacks on ABC operations but the estimated cost saving of \$1.2 million and a fresh shortwave contract are not valid reasons for the ABC ending an essential service in the NT without consultation. (South Pacific Shortwave Service - \$2.8 million).⁷

We have advocated that this issue highlights the need for an Australian Communications Infrastructure Fund to guarantee essential communication access across the country. Both the Minister for Communications and the Minister for Foreign Affairs were contacted by ABC Friends National before the closure to request urgent consideration of alternative policy options and funding. There was no response from either department.

In summary:

The ABC has breached its charter. It is not servicing the needs of all Australians and is putting at risk, those who live and work remotely and in mobile contexts in the NT and beyond. It is also not meeting its International Obligations.

In the light of the inadequacy of user consultation prior to closure and the lack of viability of suggested alternatives to shortwave, ABC Friends National calls for the ABC's shortwave services in the Northern Territory and the South Pacific to be restored pending further investigation into this issue and supports all aspects of Senator Nick Xenophon's Bill especially in the light of the following.

At Senate Estimates Environment and Communications Legislation Committee, Tuesday 28 February, Managing Director, Michelle Guthrie gave a vehement "No" to the question asked by Senator McKenzie: "Would you consider restoring the shortwave service" and this in spite of lack of evidence to close it and risk to lives by doing so. It is apparent that specific changes to the ABC 1983 Act as outlined by Senator Xenophon's Bill are required to ensure that the ABC meets its charter obligations.

Susan Pinnock

President, Friends of the ABC SA/NT

On behalf of ABC Friends National Inc.

Attachments:

APPENDIX 1:

ABCF-N Sub ABC SW Bill - Responses to ABC Transitional Arrangements after End of Short Wave Service

APPENDIX 2: ABCF-N Sub ABC SW Bill - Summary from David Hewitt

⁶ Fiona Reynolds (ABC) Transcript Senate Inquiry ABC Amendment (Rural and Regional Advocacy) Bill 2015, Melbourne 6 March 2017

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APPENDIX 1: The table below summarises the feedback ABC Friends National has had in relation to the ABC’s Transitional Arrangements upon ABC shortwave closure.

Philip Brennan (resident Darwin) has lived and worked in the NT for over 20 years and is a shortwave enthusiast. He has travelled widely and seen firsthand the benefits of shortwave radio as a cost effective means of communication for rural and remote people.

David Hewitt (lived and worked remotely in the SA, NT and WA since 1964. Now a resident in Alice Springs and working remotely as a volunteer)

First of all please note that the shortwave (SW) transmissions from Alice Springs, Tennant Creek and Katherine were received throughout the Kimberley and north of South Australia as well as the Northern Territory. Many truckies, grey nomads and other travellers would tune in to SW when the ABC AM station fades out about 100 km north of Port Augusta, or driving west across the border to WA. (David Hewitt).

| From ABC Transitional Arrangements | Philip Brennan | David Hewitt |
|---|--|--|
| Maps showing ABC AM/FM radio stations NT | The maps in the document showing FM and AM coverage give an indication of the complete lack of penetration these signals have into the NT. At an estimate, somewhere between 85-90% of the NT landmass cannot receive an FM or AM broadcast. | FM reception is only available within about 20km of the transmitter and AM, 80 to 90km. As Phil Brennan says, 85% to 90% of the NT landmass cannot receive FM or AM broadcast. When driving west of Uluru as we often do, we would lose the FM station at Yulara 15km out, then we would change over to SW in our vehicle. |
| Viewer Access Satellite Television (VAST) and NBN SkyMuster Satellite Service | VAST technology is confined to a base station, i.e. house, and equipment cost starts at \$500. NBN SkyMuster is seemingly fraught with difficulties and is also base station limited. The following article gives an indication of the difficulties customers are experiencing with this system: http://spacenews.com/australias-nbn-satellite-consumer-broadband-service-suffering-outages-and-customer-response-issues/ . | Viewer Access Satellite Television or VAST is only suitable for a fixed location where power is available and where a satellite dish can be secured permanently. This is completely unsuitable for the majority of SW listeners. <i>“NBN Skymuster satellite service provides broadband connectivity to regional and remote areas”</i> - this is only available with the NBN, and this has a very limited coverage in NT. It is no substitute for ABC radio. RN Breakfast 13 March 2017: Suffers from “rain fade”. Not reliable in remote situations. |

ABC Friends National - Submission to the Australian Broadcasting Corporation Amendment (Restoring Shortwave Radio) Bill 2017.

| From ABC Transitional Arrangements | Philip Brennan | David Hewitt |
|---|--|--|
| Podcasts and On Demand Radio: download before you travel | | To suggest that podcasts and on demand radio, downloaded for later replay are a suitable replacement for radio reception, is ridiculous. Listeners want instant news, weather reports and emergency information. |
| Streaming: listen to ABC radio live where ever mobile phone reception is available | The two other options are landline broadband and mobile data. Landline broadband is extremely limited geographically in the NT. The following page from Telstra shows that the service is restricted to larger urban centres: http://broadbandguide.com.au/northern-territory . Mobile data is similarly restricted. See the following map showing Telstra coverage in the NT https://www.telstra.com.au/coverage-networks/our-coverage . The other providers cover less than Telstra. | This assumes that mobile phone reception or a satellite service is available throughout the Northern Territory and for people on the move, which of course is not true. |
| Weather and Emergency Information. The NT Govt operates a website providing up to date alerts and information about cyclones and emergencies. | | The NT government website for weather and emergency information is only available where there is internet coverage. This is of no help to travellers, people on cattle stations, Aboriginal rangers, road construction workers or others who need news, weather information or warnings. |

ABC Friends National - Submission to the Australian Broadcasting Corporation Amendment (Restoring Shortwave Radio) Bill 2017.

| From ABC Transitional Arrangements | Philip Brennan | David Hewitt |
|--|--|--|
| Safety Information: Two-way shortwave. | The VKS737/RFDS HF radio system has its limitations and a transceiver costs between \$3,000-\$4,000 plus and antenna (no less than \$500 at my estimation) and installation into the vehicle. Cattle stations would be running multiple vehicles so this is a costly alternative. I have read an article in recent days which discussed the shortcomings with the VKS737/RFDS transmitters which are not suited for the use intended by the ABC. VKS737/RFDS transmissions can be detected on a higher end SW receiver with single side band capability but I expect that most ordinary users would not have this feature on their radios. | Two-way short wave through networks like VKS737 or VMS469 have very limited use. A transceiver radio and special aerial costing together around \$4000 is needed, then a licence for \$150 per year. The networks can only be accessed with an agreement with the providers. They are only suitable for either a fixed installation or for installation in a vehicle where a battery supply is available. None of these networks provide the kind of weather and road information, specific to the Northern Territory that is available through ABC radio. |

Other feedback re alternatives from David Hewitt:

Michael Millett also said people with shortwave receivers can tune to the HF shortwave transmissions provided by the Royal Flying Doctor and Territory Emergency services for necessary information. This is absolutely wrong. RFDS has confirmed that they have not provided this information for many years. NT Emergency Services advise that they do not provide shortwave transmissions to public. They told me that **“the ABC is the emergency broadcaster in the Territory”**.

The ABC has made much of the weather information available through the Bureau of Meteorology weather channels. They should have checked first with their staff in Darwin who advise that “the BoM SW broadcasts are for marine forecasts and information only”. They use a computer activated voice that sends out coastal waters details on the hour every hour for about 10 minutes for waters from the Gulf of Carpentaria around the WA coast to Esperance. This is of no use at all for a tour operator who needs weather information for the Simpson Desert!

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APPENDIX 2

SUMMARY DAVID HEWITT: Senate Inquiry Darwin 9 March 2017, Australian Broadcasting Corporation Amendment (Rural and Regional Advocacy) Bill 2015

The Senate committee Hearing certainly provided a lot of valuable information that the ABC management needs to take note of. It was a real pity that nobody from management was there. I guess they were relieved as there were many comments they would not have wanted to hear and also they would have faced some quite embarrassing questions.

There were seven people speaking in person and another seven by teleconference. The three members on the panel, Senators McDonald (chairperson) Urquhart and McCarthy had obviously done a lot of research and asked questions that were very much to the point. They received a clear message from all the participants that everyone really valued shortwave.

The NT Govt representatives were first and in answer to a question they said the government was not consulted either before or after the announcement of the closure. Other people were asked the same question and all gave the same answer - quite extraordinary. Kathlene Robinson and Doug Cooke from NT Department of Corporate and Information Services estimated that there are 55 000 residents of NT who cannot receive either AM or FM radio and who would be potential listeners to shortwave radio. (of course not all of them would listen to the radio). Then there are the truckies, grey nomads and other travellers passing through the Territory.

The CEO of the Cattlemen's Association, Tracey Hayes and their president Tom Stockwell gave an excellent presentation. Tom was speaking by phone from his station near Daly Waters. They referred to the emotional value of keeping in touch with the outside world and I had said the same in my written submission. It was interesting that the new patrol minister for Frontier Services of the Uniting Church who visits cattle stations and remote communities in Central Australia also referred to this and quoted the owner of Amaroo Station north of Alice.

There was a satphone call from the skipper of a fishing boat in the Gulf of Carpentaria. He suggested that hundreds of fishermen listened to shortwave and said he was "tired of the lies. lies. lies from the ABC". Something that I think a lot of us felt but were not prepared to say. He said that when in Cairns he could tune in to shortwave to get weather reports for sailing back to the NT - so much for the ABC's claim that it was only good for up to 200km.

Phil Brennan gave some excellent technical information and had produced a map that he showed the committee with the areas covered by AM and FM stations. That left about 85% of the Territory with no coverage except for shortwave.

A fellow phoned in from a station near Borroloola, Malarndirri McCarthy's home town. He mentioned that when Cyclone Blanche was off the coast 2 weeks ago, warnings were given in English and Kriol (a language spoken in Arnhem Land) for the benefit of small communities along the coast. He said the only problem was that without shortwave most of these people would not have heard the warnings. When we were working at La Grange on the Kimberley coast two cyclones passed close by the community and we were reassured that someone was thinking of us by the warnings that were given every three hours. ABC Country Hour staff manned the radio from Perth 24 hours a day till the cyclone threat was over.

A good message was given by a representative from 4 wheel drive clubs in NT and a member of a Toyota 4 wheel drive club phoned in, both saying how their members depended on shortwave when travelling out bush. Gary Williams, a truckie who was featured in a story in the Australian with Nick Xenophon on 30th January said the company he worked for in Adelaide had shortwave radios in all their vehicles. He was leaving on a trip to Darwin next week and would miss not being able to listen to the radio as he headed up the Stuart Highway in his truck.

I showed a small Sangean shortwave radio that we used with a 20 metre wire just thrown over a tree when we were stationary in a community. (we have the Codan transceiver in the Land Rover). I also had a photo of the emergency radio 783AM sign south of Alice and the email from our friend Col Blobel on the BoM forecasts that only apply to offshore waters.

The ABC has been heavily promoting VAST as an alternative to shortwave. Apart from the fact that it is only good on fixed locations, several people at the Hearing said it won't work when there is heavy cloud and this means when a cyclone is around. Benjamin Quilliam from Frontier Services who used to work for Codan Radios in Adelaide said that Curtin Springs station south of Alice was concerned that it would not work through smoke haze either. With such a good season there are likely to be big grass fires later in the year. Shortwave radio will work whatever the weather conditions.

At the 3.00pm break Matt Peacock introduced himself to a group of us. I was pleased that he was there and he was writing in a large spiral bound book. He left just before I did my presentation but he handed around his card. I will send him the notes that I was going to read out to the committee. The bloke representing the NT Seafood Council started asking him questions about the ABC Board but Matt said he could not comment on any deliberations of the Board. I am sure Matt got the message that the NT is not happy with the decision of the Board.

That's about all. It was a very interesting time in Darwin. Last week I really appreciated last minute support from Alex and Rohan Barwick and Rick Hind in the ABC office in Alice and from Col Blobel, retired Bureau of Meteorology weather observer. The Senators on the committee were great. Senator McDonald did a fine job as chair, specially with so many people phoning in.

We can just hope for the success of Nick Xenophon's Bill, or that the ABC will be so embarrassed by their decision that they will re-instate shortwave!

After the Hearing, Malarndirri McCarthy phoned her father and I had quite a long talk with him. John was a teacher at Docker River when we started there in 1970. He later studied social work and for many years worked in the office of the Education Department in Alice where he said Malarndirri attended school. John is now in Sydney.

David Hewitt