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To: CTA.Reps@aph.gov.au
Subject: enquiry into regional radio

Although the Friends of the ABC has put in a submission nationally, I would like to make a smaller submission based on my journey into regional and rural New South Wales. This submission is on behalf of my many rural, regional and remote members.

On my travels I called in to a number of country ABC stations and discovered that there were a number of problems which could be solved with very little money.

1. A number of my members in the Central Coast region are unable to get a clear signal from ABC radio. They get a lot of interference and have complained repeatedly, but to no avail.
2. A problem common to all regional stations is that they are unable to pay "stringers" (freelance journalists) to cover stories in their area. This becomes a greater problem when one realises that most stations function with one and a half journalists. This means that although their physical reach is very large, they cannot leave the station to travel out through their area to do local stories that are further away from the station.
3. A Christmas, when there are holidays, staff cannot take holidays together as there is no-one to replace them. This holds true also if the journalists are sick. Previously, staff could be sent from ABC rural capital city.
4. One journalist at one of the regional stations when interviewed by me, said that he was on duty for breakfast, his other half journalist came on in the afternoon. He then, without any overtime, had to come back into the station to prepare breakfast and morning radio for the next day. If either of them fell sick -- there was no-one even from head office to step into the breach.
5. Many people in regional and rural areas use the ABC like an encyclopaedia. They frequently ring to ask information about stories they have heard. Even school children sometimes call about information for school projects. The journalists love this interaction, however, since they have to research their stories, put them to air after editing them, and update the local web page, they are hard pressed to do this while performing the job of receptionist and librarian. I was told that, even if one person could be found and paid for four or five mornings a week, this would make a tremendous difference. Of course, they are now being told they can work out their own budgets and do this, but then the money comes out of that used for content, new fax machines and the like. The money is not able to be stretched the number of ways it needs to be. People not involved in ABC matters do not realise that making content is critical to having programs to broadcast. It is the content that goes out on radio and television that is used to fill the ABC web site. They are all intertwined.
6. Being trained country journalists, they were very conscious of the fact

that they couldn't leave the office to travel out to remoter areas and felt frustrated that they could not cover the stories from those areas adequately.

7. When in Narrabri on a speaking tour, I met a farmer who told me he had changed his car because the old one's radio couldn't pick up the ABC sufficiently clearly. This is just a charming anecdote, but he told it to me to emphasise the depth of feeling that he had for the ABC.

8. At that time it was the ABC's 65th birthday. I decided to have a birthday cake at Narrabri outside the ABC shop. The person (who has now left the ABC) who was in charge of the breakfast program in Tamworth, drove two and a half hours to cut the cake and talk to the local paper. She then drove two and a half hours back. She had been at the station since 4 am that morning and would return at night to make sure that everything was okay for the next day's broadcasting.

9. Dedicated Sydney ABC staff came to Bowral in March of this year when the local bookshop held an ABC day. These people came on their day off to an information/conference day. Local people in Bowral were delighted at the day, but said they wanted more local content on the stations that serve them.

10. In times of fire, flood or cyclone, dedicated ABC staff stay on air, sometimes for 24 hours straight, to give information that saves lives. I was in Coffs Harbour when flooding occurred a couple of years ago, and were it not for the ABC station, no-one would have known where the safe roads were.

11. Many commercial stations are now networked from city radio stations. This means local content is completely absent.

12. Lack of money has forced a number of programs to be networked through to rural and regional stations over the last few years. 2BL is networked throughout New South Wales at night and for part of the morning. Loss of local input, again.

With the advent of digital television, ABC regional and rural radio stations have the capability of becoming local television stations and making and running programs of interest to the local area (see ABC Charter). The ABC has asked for \$194 million to digitise. They will receive approximately \$20. The \$194 million figure was corroborated by Anderson Consulting, employed by the Federal Government. When television came to Australia, the parliament voted money to fund it. The same thing happened when colour came to Australia. Digital technology should be available to all ABC regional and rural stations, so that the ABC can continue its job of providing quality communication to country people.

This is just a short submission from Friends of the ABC NSW Inc and involves mostly personal observations, but it is important that the Members of Parliament in country areas realise that when the money at the core of the ABC in the capital cities is cut, the money for country areas has to stretch further. You cannot separate the country and city money -- the ABC is like a tree with its branches dying if the trunk is left starved.

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