

Senate Standing Committee on Environment and Communications
Answers to Senate Estimates Questions on Notice
Additional Estimates February 2017
Communications Portfolio
Australian Broadcasting Corporation

Question No: 95

Australian Broadcasting Corporation

Hansard Ref: Pages 85-86, 28/02/2017

Topic: New towers timeframe

Senator Moore, Claire asked:

Senator MOORE: I am certainly no technical expert in this space, and I am not arguing that it is the best service. What I am saying is that people have said to me that the alternative services are not fully in place yet.

Ms Guthrie: As Mr Millett highlighted, we are making investments in FM transmitters.

Senator MOORE: So the short wave process across the Pacific has been cut off—

Ms Guthrie: Yes.

Senator MOORE: and you are putting out the contracts for the new towers now. What would be the turnaround time for those new towers to be operational?

Mr Pendleton: We will have to take that on notice, but it will not be too long. They will be with existing providers up there.

Senator MOORE: My understanding is that one of the things that was talked about, at least in the region and at least with me, was a service working in tandem until there was absolute certainty of alternative services for the kinds of things that short wave can do in the region, particularly during natural disasters. This was raised with me a number of times, particularly in New Guinea and Fiji, and I am interested to see whether it was raised with you: that during periods such as floods, cyclones or tsunamis the short wave service was the only way that people could get communication effectively in remote areas. If I can get information on that I would be very grateful, because in my letter I asked for some information about what alternative services were available. Is there confidence that, with the short wave services cut off, there are appropriate communication methodologies in those regions now?

Mr Millett: I do know—and Mr Pendleton can probably assist here—that we are exploring the possibility of whether or not you can fly in portable transmitters, which is what we did in the bushfire regions of Victoria when there was a bushfire a few years ago and that knocked out the transmitter systems. Are you aware of anything more in regard to that?

Mr Pendleton: No. We would have to take that on notice. I think in terms of our remit for being an emergency broadcaster internationally, I am not necessarily sure that Radio Australia provides that sort of service. I would point out that there was a technology end date in relation to the international short-wave services. Those transmitters are all at end-of-life and our contract could not necessarily be extended for any long period of time. Those transmitters need to be rebuilt, and that was looking for longer than a five-year commitment from our service provider. So it was a decision point anyway that we had to make in relation to the technology.

Senator MOORE: That would have been no surprise though, would it Mr Pendleton? You have been looking at this for a long time.

Mr Pendleton: We have been looking at it for a long time.

Senator MOORE: I do not think it snuck up.

Mr Pendleton: No, it did not. We have been extending the services with the old transmitters.

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Senator MOORE: I am interested in getting some more information from you, certainly on notice, as to if you are convinced that for all the services that were available for short wave in the Pacific—and I am sure this is the same question for the other parts of Australia as well—that at this point of turn-off comparable, if not better services, are available while we are waiting for other changes?

Mr Pendleton: I will take that on notice.

Answer:

1. The ABC will install additional Radio Australia FM transmitters in Papua New Guinea at Mount Hagen, Goroka and Arawa (Bougainville). A tender process has already commenced for these services and it is expected that the transmitters will be operational by the second half of this year.
2. The ABC's obligations as set out in the Charter requires the Corporation to transmit internationally with the effect of encouraging awareness of Australia in those countries and enabling Australian citizens who are overseas to obtain information about current affairs in Australia. As such, Radio Australia's program schedule doesn't naturally accommodate breaking information or emergency alerts. However, through its international development programs, the ABC supports broadcasters in the Pacific and elsewhere to build their capacity for emergency broadcasting and to raise awareness on disaster preparedness and risk reduction. These programs also facilitate collaboration between local agencies which play a specific role with the local media in disaster management.
3. Radio Australia continues to operate throughout the Asia Pacific via an extensive satellite network, a range of FM transmitters, via online streaming, a dedicated mobile app and on relay through local partner stations.