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12 January 2018

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Senate Standing Committees on Environment and Communications
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Submission on the *Australian Broadcasting Corporation Amendment (Rural and Regional Measures) Bill 2017*

Introduction

Free TV Australia (Free TV) thanks the Committee for the opportunity to indicate our support for the *Australian Broadcasting Corporation Amendment (Rural and Regional Measures) Bill 2017*.

Free TV represents Australia's commercial free-to-air television broadcasters. At no cost to the public, our members provide a wide array of channels across a broad range of genres, as well as rich online and mobile offerings. The value of commercial free-to-air television to the Australian public remains high. 19 million Australians watch free-to-air television each week.

The Bill proposes a set of modest but important changes to the ABC Charter. These are supported by a Regional Advisory Council, an enhanced set of reporting requirements and a requirement for at least two Directors to have substantial connections to regional Australia.

Amending the Charter

The Bill would amend section 6 of the *Australian Broadcasting Corporation Act 1983* so that the domestic functions of that national broadcaster would be:

- a) 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 and, without limiting the generality of the foregoing, to provide:
 - (i) broadcasting programs that contribute to a sense of regional and national identity and inform and entertain, and reflect the geographic and cultural diversity of, the Australian community; and
 - (ii) broadcasting programs of an educational nature.

Free TV considers that these amendments would add some much-needed detail to the ABC's charter and help the national broadcaster operate within the intention of its Act.

Importantly, Free TV notes that the proposed amendments would work alongside clause 6(2)(a)(i) of the Charter that requires that the ABC take account of the broadcasting services provided by the commercial and community sectors of the Australian broadcasting system. Properly interpreted and enacted, this should mean that the new provisions contained in this Bill would focus the ABC on providing unique services to regional and rural areas.

A summary of the services that are provided throughout rural and regional Australia by commercial free-to-air networks is attached to this submission. Free TV members are proud of the significant investment in local services that they already provide to regional Australians. From Townsville to Bunbury and everywhere in between, Australians rely on commercial free-to-air television for their news and current affairs.

The commercial sector employs hundreds of regional Australians as journalists and production staff and plays an important role in bringing regional communities together. In addition to providing local news services, regional broadcasters support their local communities through providing community service announcements and community partnerships. For example, Free TV members are proud supporters of important local services like the NSW SES, Royal Far West, Act for Kids and Surf Life Saving Australia.

In recognition of the existing investment in regional and rural programming, a 2017 Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA) survey in regional Australia found that commercial free-to-air TV was the most preferred source for local news. In addition, commercial free-to-air TV was found to be the most trusted media news source for regional Australians across all platforms.¹

It is worth highlighting that the ACMA found that twice as many people trust commercial free-to-air television for local news as compared to ABC TV. It is clear from these results that regional Australians value those providers that are prepared to invest in local services. In contrast, ABC TV does not provide local regional TV news—providing only one state-wide news service in each state. By contrast, commercial free-to-air broadcasters provide high quality local news services in many television markets across Australia.

This Bill would go some way towards focussing the ABC on regional Australians who do not currently receive a local news service.

Regional Directors, Advisory Council and Reporting Requirements

The ABC Board currently consists of up to 9 people, including the Managing Director, Chair and elected staff representative. The Bill would require that at least two of the remaining Directors (or the Chair) have a substantial connection to regional Australia. In addition, the Bill would create a Regional Advisory Council to advise the Board on the provision of broadcasting services in regional areas.

Free TV considers that these two measures are important as they would enable the ABC to make better informed investment decisions in regional areas and ensure that they have full knowledge of the suite of services already provided by the commercial sector. In turn this will help focus the expenditure of taxpayers' money in markets consistent with the ABC's Charter.

The requirement that the particulars of any advice received from the Regional Advisory Council be included in the Annual Report will add an important level of transparency in decision making of matters impacting regional Australians. Consistent with this transparent

¹ ACMA, Local content in regional Australia 2017 report, May 2017, pg 9

approach, Free TV notes that the Bill would require a reporting on metropolitan and regional staffing levels.





Further information

We would welcome the opportunity to discuss the issues raised in this submission with the Committee. In the meantime, if you would like to discuss any of the issues raised, please do not hesitate to contact me on .

Your sincerely

On behalf of Free TV Australia

FREE TV AUSTRALIA MEMBERS – COMMITTED TO REGIONAL AUSTRALIA

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 30-minute weeknight bulletins for each of the following areas: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ north coast of NSW and south-east Queensland (crews based in Taree, Lismore, Port Macquarie, Ballina & Coffs Harbour); ○ north west of NSW (crews based in Tamworth); ○ central west of NSW (crews based in Orange and Dubbo); ○ regional Victoria (based in Albury/Wodonga) ○ the Riverina (based in Wagga Wagga); ○ regional WA Australia (crews based Bunbury, Albany, Kalgoorlie, Geraldton, Broome and Perth); • Local news updates to the Newcastle/Hunter areas in northern NSW, the Wollongong and Canberra areas of southern NSW, and the Shepparton, Bendigo, Ballarat, and Gippsland areas of regional Victoria.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Weekday 60-minute bulletins in fifteen areas across regional Queensland, southern NSW, and regional Victoria (sourced from locally based crews); • A 60-minute news bulletin, 7 nights a week in Tasmania; • A weekday 30-minute bulletin in Broken Hill, and the Spencer Gulf (sourced from reporters in Port Pirie, Port Augusta, Port Lincoln, Whyalla and Broken Hill); • Local news updates for Remote Central and Eastern Australia and Darwin.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Weekday 30-minute news bulletins across Cairns, Townsville, Mackay, Wide Bay, Toowoomba, the Sunshine Coast and Rockhampton.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Six 60-minute local news bulletins in the northern NSW licence area and the Gold Coast.

In addition to the Free TV members above, WIN Corporation also produces a news services in these areas:

- Fourteen 30-minute weekday bulletins in regional Queensland, southern New South Wales, and regional Victoria;
- A 60-minute news bulletin, 7 nights a week in Tasmania; and
- Local news updates in Mt Gambier and in the Riverland in South Australia.