

## **RURAL HEALTH EDUCATION FOUNDATION SUBMISSION To the Senate Standing Committee on Environment, Communications and the Arts**

The Rural Health Education Foundation welcomes the Government's commitment to supplying a comprehensive digital satellite television solution to rural and remote Australia.

The introduction of this new satellite does, however, have major implications for the Rural Health Education Foundation (the Foundation – see our website [www.rhef.com.au](http://www.rhef.com.au) for more details). Our organisation is a non-profit public service educational organisation committed to improving the health of rural and remote Australia through improved health education, both for health professionals and health consumers. Since 1992, the Foundation has developed and currently manages a network of more than 660 satellite sites throughout rural and remote Australia, all of them serving health and medical professionals, and which are located in private homes, hospitals, clinics, educational institutions, Indigenous health services, telecentres and other organisations.<sup>1</sup> Funding to develop this network has been provided over many years by the Australian Government Department of Health and Ageing, as well as a number of philanthropic foundations and trusts.

The Foundation is an active satellite television user through the Optus Aurora platform and the "business television" service, undertaking a number of satellite broadcasts each month, reaching many thousands of rural and remote health professionals and their community members each year, providing them with essential health and medical education, updates and information. Our current broadcast schedule is available at [www.rhef.com.au/upcoming-programs/](http://www.rhef.com.au/upcoming-programs/) and our list of recent (currently distributed programs) is available at [www.rhef.com.au/programs/](http://www.rhef.com.au/programs/). The Foundation works closely with Westlink (which is part of the Western Australia Department of Local Government and Regional Development) and Queensland Health in distributing our educational materials via satellite.

The Foundation's essential concerns with the new free-to-air TV satellite platform (and hence this Bill) are:

- The new satellite service will completely subsume the current Aurora platform in the medium term – making it obsolete by the end of 2013 (if not earlier) – thereby leaving the Foundation (and other users) without satellite access.
- There is no provision for the Foundation – and other users of the Aurora platform (including NITV, Westlink, Queensland Health and others) - to access the new satellite platform. To maintain its current service delivery, the Foundation needs to gain access to the new satellite platform and be able to have its services received through the same set top boxes as will be used to receive commercial and national free-to-air services on the platform.

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<sup>1</sup> A list of the Foundation's satellite network locations is available at [www.rhef.com.au/viewing-sites/](http://www.rhef.com.au/viewing-sites/) - note that only "public" institutional sites are listed; sites located in private homes and limited access facilities (i.e. correctional institutions, etc.) are not. The Foundation's programs are also distributed through the Internet, on DVD and through other broadcast services from time to time.

- Even with access to the new satellite platform, the cost for the Rural Health Education Foundation and its vast network of satellite sites to convert to the new platform will be substantial.

At the very minimum, new set top boxes will be required to participate in the new platform (and possibly adjustments to all satellite dishes), requiring an investment of some hundreds of thousands of dollars, and possibly more. The Foundation's satellite network – along the Westlink and Queensland Health networks – have been established with a substantial public investment. In the Foundation's case, this has primarily been from the Commonwealth Government, particularly the Department of Health and Ageing. It is essential that this public investment in rural and remote Australian communities, made over many years, be supported. The "opportunity cost" of losing these important health and educational satellite networks would be significant: the proper maintenance and transfer to the new satellite system is a significant investment in the future health and well-being of rural and remote Australia.

It is clear that once the new digital satellite is launched and operational, Aurora users will start to migrate to the new service, making Aurora less and less attractive to users and viewers. Although it will not disappear immediately, it will effectively become a very "lonely" place as Australia's digital television switch-over gathers pace. It is very unlikely that many satellite consumers (homes or institutions) will wish to utilise two different set top boxes, even if it is technically possible to do so with the same satellite dish. To our knowledge, there is no current plan to replace the Aurora service once it has closed down; thus the move by the Rural Health Education Foundation and other service providers to the new satellite platform is essential.

In summary, the Rural Health Education Foundation requests that it:

- be given appropriate access (along with other satellite users) to the new satellite platform at a reasonable cost and with reasonable administrative processes by the authority which manages the new platform;
- be consulted and involved in future planning of the new satellite platform, so that it can effectively plan its educational distribution in a timely and efficient manner; and
- be provided with appropriate financial resources to enable participation in the new satellite platform through installation of new equipment as required.

For more information, contact:

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