



24 March 2017

Ms Christine McDonald
Secretary
Senate Standing Committee on Environment and Communications
Email: ec.sen@aph.gov.au

Dear Ms McDonald

Re: ABC Shortwave Services in the Northern Territory

Regional Development Australia Northern Territory (RDA NT) has identified telecommunications as a critical element underpinning the economic and social development of the NT's vast remote regions. Given the importance of telecommunications and the Australian Government's emphasis on developing Northern Australia, it is disturbing that the last year has been an unyielding battle to retain the existing level of minimum services provided to remote residents.

The Telecommunications Universal Service Obligation Inquiry threatens to reduce or remove the current consumer service guarantees. The proposed Telecommunications Reform Package calls into question the potential for a holistic and strategic approach towards remote telecommunications. The Barkly region recently experienced reduced Bureau of Meteorology services due to the loss of the Tennant Creek weather radar, seriously impacting upon aviation and the pastoral industry with no thought to alternative services. In this context the cessation of the ABC shortwave transmission services, with no prior consultation and little apparent regard for the impacts, is just one more blow to the Northern Territory's, and Australia's, most poorly serviced residents.

In a first world nation it is expected that consumer rights will be protected, with a particular emphasis on those most disadvantaged. It is also expected that services will steadily improve over time, particularly through the application of new technologies. And yet the 'digital divide' for those living and working in remote regions of Australia does not seem to be narrowing, it is and will continue to be at risk of widening while the current policies of servicing the majority at the expense of those less able to demonstrate and express their dissatisfaction continues.

The suggestion that the decision to cease shortwave transmission services only impacted the 15 people who called the ABC to complain is patently absurd. The true number of users is clearly a matter for debate but should certainly have been more thoroughly examined before the service was discontinued. The number of users will be low relative to the cost of the service, this is the reality of all remote area telecommunications and the very reason why consumer protection measures are so important to consumers who live and/or work in remote locations. What is critical to understand is that there are very limited service choices in remote regions and, as a consequence, the impact of any reduction in services is monumentally greater than it would be in populated areas. The impact on remote Indigenous communities and outstations alone cannot be discounted given their reliance on these services and their contribution to “closing the gap”.

We implore you to restore the shortwave transmission services which were ceased earlier this year. For a small number of people there are few, or no, other options. Furthermore, in remote regions this service is not simply a matter of entertainment, it is a matter of community connectivity and safety in areas where people struggle with the impacts of isolation and are far removed from immediate response help and assistance.

Please do not hesitate to contact our CEO Kate Peake on telephone _____ or by
email _____

Yours sincerely

Mike Reed
Chair, Regional Development Australia NT



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