

The Committee Secretary,
Senate Committee on the Environment and Communications
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Australian Broadcasting Corporation Amendment (Rural and Regional Advocacy) Bill.
Submission regarding the ABC shortwave service to the Northern Territory.

I have been a listener to ABC radio through the Alice Springs shortwave transmitter for many years. I first came up to Central Australia in 1964 to work at Amata, a remote Aboriginal community where I met my wife, a nurse. We have spent many years in Aboriginal communities in the north of South Australia, the Northern Territory and the Kimberley of Western Australia, in building maintenance and nursing.

Since moving to Alice Springs five years ago I have worked with remote dialysis clinics on a voluntary basis and with an organisation that provides opportunities for city school students to visit the Outback. Both these roles require much bush travel.

Working in remote areas for so long, ABC shortwave radio has always been our link with the outside world, providing valuable details on weather, rainfall, road conditions as well as news and entertainment, and the emotional value of 'keeping in touch'.

Regrettably, the shortwave transmitters in Alice Springs, Tennant Creek and Katherine were turned off on 31st January. There is now no viable substitute for the many people who have depended on shortwave for ABC radio programs.

In proposals to amend the ABCs charter in relation to delivery of services to rural and regional Australia, we believe that there should be an absolute commitment to provide radio reception to even the remotest parts of the country.

We hope that your committee may be able to influence the Government and the ABC to re-instate the shortwave service.

Despite what ABC management says, the alternatives to shortwave for radio programs that they are suggesting - The VAST satellite system, FM, AM, digital radio, podcast or Sky Muster are not practical for the many people who are continually on the move. They include tour operators, Aboriginal sea rangers, stock camps and cattle stations, truckies, grey nomads touring the Outback, road construction workers, residents of small remote Indigenous communities and tradesmen travelling between remote communities.

It is of great concern to us that the ABC has been making statements that are simply not accurate, in an attempt to justify their decision to cease shortwave transmission. This shows a total lack of understanding of the communication needs of travelers, residents and workers in the Northern Territory the Kimberley and of the geography of the region.

Some of these claims are:

“Local radio can be received by the majority of Territorians via AM and FM terrestrial transmissions”.

However, *Reception Advice* from the ABC lists three AM and twelve FM stations in the Territory. The AM transmitters in fact only have a range of 80 to 90 kilometres and for FM, 10 to 20 kilometres. It is estimated that 85% to 90% of the Territory is not covered by either AM or FM radio.

“Shortwave audio quality is relatively poor, it requires a frequency change each morning and evening, and shortwave is not available in the majority of domestic and car radios”. This is not correct - we received excellent audio on our shortwave radio through the Alice Springs transmitter, 24 hours a day and a frequency change is not necessary. Excellent little radios with short wave capability, costing between \$70 and \$140 are available from two electronics shops in Alice Springs.

“Short wave reception is only good for up to 200 kilometres”.

This is wrong - we regularly received ABC radio programs through the stations in Tennant Creek, Alice Springs or Katherine, up to 1800 kilometres away.

“We would recommend the dedicated Bureau of Meteorology high frequency transmission which provides hourly updates and alerts on its shortwave band” and another advice, “for those on the move there are regular broadcasts on shortwave from the Australian Bureau of Meteorology who provide very detailed weather reports”. The Bureau only provides coastal waters forecasts and this is through a computer generated voice - Absolutely useless for anyone travelling inland.

For emergency situations, “People with shortwave receivers can also tune to the HF shortwave transmissions provided by the Royal Flying Doctor and Territory Emergency services for necessary information”.

The RFDS and NT Emergency Services both advised last week that they do not provide radio communication for the public.

On 9th January a senior ABC manager wrote “fewer than 20 people have contacted the ABC about the Northern Territory services since the 6th December announcement and the

majority of these have been international and interstate ham radio enthusiasts”.

This is not correct. On the Country Hour around mid December, an ABC representative said there had been more than 40 objections from Territory listeners. Following the report that day there was a flood of text messages and phone calls to both the Darwin and Alice Springs stations. We know of many more complaints lodged with the ABC and with Territory politicians since then.

The ABC has announced that 2-way shortwave through bases such as VKS737 National Fourwheel Drive Network and VMS469 Reids Radiodata will be given VAST equipment for providing emergency information. The benefit of these networks is very limited, a \$4000 radio and aerial are needed with a license costing \$140 per year, to talk to them. Transmission is single sideband that has reception problems on a basic shortwave radio.

Summary:

The ABC has supplied a lot of incorrect information that may have raised listener’s hopes of an equal or better replacement for the shortwave service. There is nothing that equals shortwave radio in the Northern Territory, even into the future, particularly for essential safety information relative to weather and road conditions.

Safety is our main concern, but for people living and working in remote regions, their welfare and sense of belonging provided by radio reception is equally important. ABC radio presenters in the Territory are very good at including all listeners in their programs.

None of the options nominated by ABC management are of any use whatsoever if a listener is mobile and does not have a reliable power supply.

It will be extremely difficult for many listeners, including Aboriginal people to use the complex two-way shortwave networks such as that which VKS737 or VMS469 offer.

ABC staff in Darwin and Alice Springs, Federal politicians, Warren Snowdon and Senators Malarndirri McCarthy and Nigel Scullion, and *Friends of the ABC* have been particularly helpful, lobbying on behalf of Territory residents for short wave to continue.

We are constantly reminded on ABC radio that “this is your emergency broadcaster”. Sadly it will not be any longer for listeners who depended on the shortwave service.

As an experienced tour operator has said “There is no alternative but to leave it on”.

David Hewitt, Alice Springs. 8th February 2017