



Advancing Australian Cotton

16 January 2018

Committee Secretary
Senate Standing Committees on Environment and Communications
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Dear Committee Secretary

Re: Australian Broadcasting Corporation Amendment (Fair and Balanced) Bill 2017 and Australian Broadcasting Corporation Amendment (Rural and Regional Measures) Bill 2017

Cotton Australia is the peak industry body representing Australia's cotton growers. We thank the Senate Standing Committees on Environment and Communications for the opportunity to provide a submission to this inquiry. Our brief submission will address both bills subject to inquiry.

Cotton Australia is a member of the National Farmers' Federation (NFF) who have also provided a submission, the positions of which we support.

Cotton Australia acknowledges the important role that the ABC plays in Australia, particularly for rural and regional areas where in many cases it is one of the only sources of news coverage. Particularly in these areas, the ABC keeps people connected and informed which is vital to a healthy social fabric. The ABC has a number of longstanding, valued rural programs such as Landline and ABC Country Hour, which remain relevant and high quality news sources. Cotton Australia values and has long invested in the relationships we have with our ABC regional journalists in the important communications work that we carry out for our industry.

Australian Broadcasting Corporation Amendment (Fair and Balanced) Bill 2017

We and the Australian public expect journalism to be accurate and impartial, and free of political motivation. In the circumstance of the ABC where this journalism is publicly funded it is imperative this standard is met.

However, as the NFF has stated, a number of recent incidents have given rise to concerns that reports or activities of the ABC have been motivated to sensationalise and influence. There is also concern for the way agricultural industries are more often than not negatively represented in the ABC's reporting, particularly to its metropolitan audiences. Our industry has been the subject of recent ABC journalism which has (and continues to be) a troubling and damaging experience, for the misrepresentation, inaccuracies and sensationalism that it involved.

On 24 July 2017 4 Corners aired an episode titled '*Pumped*' outlining issues of compliance with water regulation and the alleged theft of water in the northern Murray-Darling Basin. Further, on 22 and 23 November 2017 the Lateline program aired stories related to the management of water on the Barwon-Darling Rivers. Cotton Australia and our irrigator group colleagues condemn and have no tolerance for water theft. However, there are a number of concerns and issues with the way these stories were developed and presented by the ABC. We reiterate the key points raised by the NFF:

- that the 4 Corners program named two specific irrigators, yet did not present conclusive evidence
- the perceived bias in the reporting of the allegations (which are currently being investigated and still remain allegations) against a few, while continuing to question the integrity, and significantly



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tarnish, the reputation of all water-users. The choice by the ABC to not present these stories within the context of the wider basin and instead narrow down into one or two areas of the Basin, appeared very much pursuit of a sensational story. This was further compounded by the continual conclusion that the Basin Plan is failing, based purely on these few stories presented well outside the broader context of the basin as a whole.

- Australia has a world leading water management system which is utilised responsibly by the vast majority of users.

Further explanation and corrections which set this story straight are included in the media release of the National Irrigators' Council (Attachment A).

We would add:

- Beyond the select local individuals interviewed, in developing 'Pumped', the ABC refused to feature other representatives such as those from peak industry bodies. Where others were interviewed, information explaining the broader context of the situation was selectively omitted. In the case of the 'Pumped' story and an interview with a cotton farmer, the ABC took 90 minutes of interview yet aired only a few minutes, quite a bit of which included pauses as well as the individual taking a drink of water.
- The stories, which ultimately portrayed a certain view of the Murray Darling Basin Plan, were based around single examples where neighbourhood disputes were a strong feature. The stories were heavily cross-promoted across the network for considerable time after.
- Yet in the same month the ABC also aired via its Landline program, a positive, carefully-compiled story on the success of the industry selling its sustainability credentials. This story received no cross promotion across the network.

As an industry representative body, we do not fear media scrutiny of our industry but do expect that scrutiny, particularly when carried out by the ABC, is impartial. That impartiality must come in the form of the ABC to forsake the temptation of being sensational, in return for balance reporting. In the 'Pumped' program, no representative was given the opportunity to refute statements in an orderly manner.

One of the impacts resulting from extensive coverage of the Four Corners and Lateline stories was that Cotton Australia had to field numerous enquiries from major global fashion brands based overseas, somewhat confused and concerned about reports of the Australian industry. In many cases these were brands that fortunately we had a relationship with, however this was still an unwanted experience, also as it made Australia's publicly funded broadcaster look poor once we had taken the opportunity to explain the story in a balanced way. Our interactions with government and politicians in Australia were similar: once we explained facts and context, they were understanding.

The Australian cotton industry – a \$2.5b industry – is highly respected internationally, and Cotton Australia in recent years has forged successful and valuable relationships internationally with major brands, retailers and NGOs, a large part of which has been a result of our participation in international cotton sustainability initiatives (the Better Cotton Initiative, Cotton Leads) which are delivering important livelihood outcomes across many developing countries. This type of journalism is highly unconstructive and presents an unwarranted risk to reputation. Nor is it healthy for the ABC's reputation.

Finally, we are aware that the stories have been strongly driven by one or two environmental bodies, which is a further cause for concern that the ABC's journalism in these instances has not been impartial, fair or balanced.



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To this end Cotton Australia supports extending the statutory duties of the ABC Board to also require the gathering and presentation of news and information to be 'fair' and 'balanced' according to the recognised standards of objective journalism.

Australian Broadcasting Corporation Amendment (Rural and Regional Measures) Bill 2017

Cotton Australia welcomes the regional measures contained in this bill as a means to refocusing and increasing emphasis towards regional services within ABC and is supportive of this bill.

Cotton Australia again thanks the Committee for this opportunity to put forward our position on these Bills. We would welcome an opportunity to provide further information on our position. For more information, contact Angela Bradburn, Policy Officer Cotton Australia on

Yours sincerely,

Angela Bradburn
Policy Officer
Cotton Australia

Attachments

Attachment A: National Irrigators' Council Media Release Friday 1 September 2017 'Irrigators Respond to Lateline Accusations' <http://www.irrigators.org.au/assets/uploads/news/20170901-Irrigators%20respond%20to%20lateline%20claims.pdf>