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MINISTER FOR BROADBAND, COMMUNICATIONS AND THE DIGITAL ECONOMY
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21 AUG 2012



The Hon John Murphy MP
Chair
The House Standing Committee on Petitions
Parliament House
PO Box 6021
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Dear  Chair

Petition regarding digital television reception in Boolarra, Victoria

Thank you for the opportunity to respond to the petition from residents of Boolarra, Victoria, regarding the quality of digital television broadcast in the area.

The Australian Government understands the importance of free-to-air television to regional and rural Australians and has introduced policy and legislative measures to maximise viewers' access to digital television services. Providing equal television services to viewers in regional, rural and remote Australia is a central feature of the government's digital switchover program.

Viewers can access the most up-to-date information about local digital television services by visiting the Digital Ready website www.digitalready.gov.au and entering their address into *mySwitch*. *mySwitch* is a web-based tool which has been developed by the Digital Switchover Taskforce to assist viewers to prepare for switchover in their area. *mySwitch* provides information about local television services, the frequencies they are broadcast on, as well as the expected coverage of the transmission sites serving an area.

Digital television reception in Boolarra, Victoria

Boolarra is located within the Gippsland switchover area, which switched to digital-only broadcasting of television services on 5 May 2011.

Television services for Boolarra are broadcast from the local Boolarra transmission site, located off Bunderra Drive approximately one kilometre North West of the main town. Both digital services for the national broadcasters – the ABC and the SBS – and the three regional commercial broadcasters – Prime, WIN and Southern Cross Austereo – are broadcast from this site.

The local Boolarra transmission site was upgraded from analog to digital services on 12 February 2011 as part of an early switchover process. The digital switchover process for the Boolarra site required a switch with no simulcast period, which meant that the analog signals were turned off before the digital broadcast signals were switched on due to space restrictions on the site. In the days following the early switchover from analog to digital, the commercial broadcasters identified and resolved some technical issues with the broadcast equipment.

Following the resolution of these issues, the Digital Switchover Taskforce and the commercial broadcasters continued to receive complaints from viewers in the area regarding ongoing problems experienced by viewers when attempting to obtain adequate reception in the Boolarra area.

Monitoring and maintenance of transmission sites by the commercial broadcasters

The commercial broadcasters, through Regional Broadcasting Australia (RBA), have advised me that they first became aware of people experiencing difficulty with television reception in Boolarra in the first quarter of 2012. At this time, they engaged a local antenna installer to investigate viewer concerns. The installer visited several residences and noted that viewers had not yet properly tuned their reception equipment to adequately receive digital services from the local Boolarra site. The installer advised RBA that he was able to resolve all reception issues in the houses that he visited by making simple adjustments to existing reception equipment.

Also in the first quarter of 2012, RBA engineers conducted an assessment of the transmission site itself and identified a tree that had the potential to reduce the level of coverage in some parts of Boolarra. This tree was removed as part of ongoing maintenance of the site in order to continue to provide good levels of coverage.

Ongoing monitoring conducted by the commercial broadcasters also noted that there were issues with the local WIN and Prime services, which had been observed to drop out intermittently. The issue was identified as being caused by a faulty GPS clock in the main Latrobe Valley transmission site on Mount Tassie. The Latrobe Valley site is the main feeder site for a number of other transmission sites in the area, including both Boolarra and the Jeeralang/Yinnar South sites. The faulty unit was subsequently replaced and no ongoing problems with either WIN or Prime have been observed by the commercial broadcasters.

RBA has also advised me of its ongoing maintenance activities across regional Victoria. All local transmitters have full-telemetry units installed, allowing real-time 24/7 monitoring of the sites from broadcaster operations centres. Any faults that are raised through the remote monitoring or via complaints from local viewers are passed on to a First-In Maintainer (FIM) for further assessment. FIM's are generally local contractors, often a reputable local antenna installer, who are given familiarisation training on specific transmission sites. The FIM conducts a basic assessment on the working condition of the equipment and whether or not repairs are required. If a problem is identified, engineering support is despatched from the state headquarters of the broadcaster responsible for maintaining a particular site, and spare transmission equipment is held in Melbourne, allowing for quick mobilisation if repairs are determined to be necessary.

RBA has advised that ongoing monitoring of the remote transmission logs for transmission sites in the Boolarra area have not identified any further issues since the replacement of the GPS unit at the Latrobe Valley transmission site on Mount Tassie.

Improving digital television reception in the Boolarra area

Separate to the technical issues that have been addressed by the broadcasters, there are a number of physical factors which may explain the reception difficulties residents in Boolarra have experienced.

If viewers had good analog television reception, it is generally the case that they would be likely to receive satisfactory digital television signals. Factors that can lead to poor reception of digital television services can include signal obstructions, such as the local terrain, foliage, and nearby buildings and trees. Reception may also break up or 'pixelate' because of old or poorly calibrated antennas, faulty cabling or connectors, incorrectly tuned set-top boxes, weather conditions, an inadequate or excessive signal, or because of 'impulse noise' interference caused by electrical equipment and appliances.

Some viewers in the Boolarra area may also receive digital television services from the nearby Jeeralang/Yinnar South transmission site or the more distant Latrobe Valley transmission site located on Mount Tassie, as well as from the local Boolarra site. Viewers in areas who receive services from more than one transmission site need to ensure that their antenna and television reception equipment are optimised to receive services from the site that provides the strongest and best quality signal to their residence. The Taskforce has consistently recommended that viewers in the Boolarra area who experience difficulty receiving digital television services should seek the services of an endorsed antenna installer who can provide advice on the best way to optimise equipment for the available services in the area, and for their specific residence.

I acknowledge that some residents of the Boolarra area may have experienced some difficulty obtaining adequate reception in the months following the commissioning of digital television services from the Boolarra site. However, I am confident that the broadcasters have completed all necessary adjustments to their transmission infrastructure in the region to enable them to provide adequate terrestrial digital television to residents of Boolarra, and that ongoing monitoring of transmission sites in the area is robust and responsive.

Further information about digital switchover

Further information about digital switchover may be obtained from the Digital Ready website at www.digitalready.gov.au or by calling the Digital Ready Information Line on free call number 1800 20 10 13. The Digital Ready Information Line operates seven days a week from 8.00 am to 10.00 pm (AEST).

I encourage residents of Boolarra to contact the Taskforce via the Digital Ready Information Line if they have done all that they reasonably can to receive digital television, including engaging the services of an endorsed antenna installer, and continue to experience reception difficulties.

Thank you for the opportunity to address the House Standing Committee on Petitions on an issue that is important to Boolarra residents.

Yours sincerely

Stephen Conroy
Minister for Broadband,
Communications and the Digital Economy