

**PARLIAMENT OF AUSTRALIA
HOUSE COMMITTEE ON COMMUNICATIONS, TRANSPORT AND THE ARTS**

RADIO INDUSTRY INQUIRY

The Gulf Local Authorities Development Association (trading as Gulf Savannah Development, GSD) submits the following report for the inquiry into the Radio Industry as it impacts on the Gulf Savannah region (26 October 2000).

The GSD region covers the Shires of Burke, Carpentaria, Croydon, Etheridge with linkages to Doomadgee and Mornington Island. The population of around 9,000 is distributed across the region with the major concentrations in Georgetown, Croydon, Normanton, Karumba and Burketown. This includes Mornington Island (approximately 1200) and Doomadgee (1500 people). An estimated 80 - 100,000 tourists visit the region every dry season between May and October.

INTRODUCTION

The Gulf Regional Development Plan, 2000 produced under the auspices of the Department of Communication, Information, Local Government, Planning and Sport, recognises that readily available communication is one of the keys to improving the wellbeing of the Gulf community, reducing isolation and enabling the region to compete on a more equitable footing with commerce and industry in other regions.

Throughout the Gulf there is limited access to the most efficient forms of telecommunications – internet, email, video conferencing. Phone and fax services are notoriously unreliable particularly during bouts of inclement weather. Access to Internet and email, where it exists, is expensive.

Therefore availability of adequate radio reception assumes considerable significance for the residents of the Gulf region and is an important facet of the socio/economic life of the community.

However, the comment has been made by one Shire that without a community survey the adequacy of the services being provided can not be determined. A recommendation arising from this submission is therefore that a survey of Gulf radio broadcast needs be undertaken. This will be considered in the light of the Gulf Regional Development Plan about to be implemented by the State Government and Gulf Savannah Development.

SOCIAL ISSUES

Radio services provide a reliable means of communication and information delivery throughout the Gulf region, taking the place of means of communication frequently used in more populated areas such as email and post. As a consequence radio broadcasting has a significant impact on a wide range of social and economic activities:

- Social events
- Education issues
- Charities
- Advice on business and community meetings
- Cattle and other commodity prices and trends
- Road transport schedules and movements
- Sport and recreation

Provision of up to date advice on recent scientific/agricultural findings and research is also best conveyed by radio medium with the infrequent mail services and lack of internet access for most of the region. Immediate notification of Government communications, policies, decisions, proposed legislation and similar government initiatives are possible via radio, providing the regional community with an opportunity to comment within limited timeframes. However, those properties and centres away from the major towns are disadvantaged where they are unable to receive reliable radio transmissions.

The lack of broadcast coverage of horse racing is a disadvantage in the far north west. None is provided to areas outside the towns and the towns only receive services such as 4TAB if provided by the local authority.

All parts of the region commented that the FM ABC radio out of Longreach and the AM ABC radio service from Mt Isa play an important role in the social life of the community and are viewed as a vital part of the social infrastructure for the region.

Locally produced content is considered desirable, although the ability to produce and maintain this service is unknown at this stage. If the digital radio service technology improvements allowed for local content at a reasonable cost, local interest would be forthcoming. There would be a need to source funding to deliver the service.

ECONOMIC/BUSINESS ISSUES

Radio provides an essential means of information delivery on all areas affecting business and trade, markets, new initiatives, political trends. To ensure greater equity with eastern areas of the State, adequate coverage outside town limits is essential to overcome the remoteness and lack of regular and frequent newspaper coverage, patchy TV reception and total lack of mobile phone services.

SAFETY ISSUES

The importance of radio communication in the remote areas of Queensland cannot be over estimated. Many parts of the western Gulf Savannah are isolated each year by flood waters and on those occasions there is reliance on radio for information, particularly relating to weather conditions, roads, access, supplies.

Communities in the Gulf area rely on the AM radio service particularly during the wet season. Burke Shire Council has raised the concern that FM and TV signals are blocked by storm clouds in the wet season when readily available information is vital.

Adequate radio coverage is also vital for the expanding tourism industry in the Gulf region. Recent studies undertaken for the GSTO have shown that the majority of visitors to remote areas rely on radio communication for up to date information on road conditions and other localised advice. Lack of such a service has been recognised as a deterrent to remote area travel in the findings.¹ As tourism is viewed as a major and most promising industry for the future development of the Savannah Gulf region, radio reception in areas outside towns is of great economic significance for the region apart from providing a measure of security and safety for travellers.

¹ "Remote Area Traveller Preferences – survey undertaken at Consumer Shows Jan to June 2000", Research Australasia and Heatherbell's Tourism Services Sept 2000

GENERAL COMMENTS

- Current radio services in Normanton are:
 - Radio National – ABC
 - Radio Regional from Longreach – ABC (AM/FM)
 - Triple J
 - 4TAB

- In general the AM broadcast of the ABC in the Burke Shire is excellent.
- Carpentaria and Croydon Shires are satisfied with the ABC coverage from Longreach and local content from both Longreach and Mt Isa is considered to be adequately meeting the needs of most people.
- A commercial radio station for the western area of the Gulf would be desirable.
- In the eastern Gulf (Etheridge Shire) objections raised include
 - lack of FM coverage and
 - poor coverage of AM and a weak signal especially away from Georgetown.

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