



WHEATBELT

REGION
DEVELOPMENT COMMISSION
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GOVERNMENT OF
WESTERN AUSTRALIA

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The Committee Secretary
House of Representatives Communications Committee
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Secretary:.....
RECEIVED
11 NOV 2000
HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
STANDING COMMITTEE ON
COMMUNICATIONS, TRANSPORT AND
THE ARTS

Dear Sir/Madam

RADIO INDUSTRY INQUIRY

The Commission is pleased to provide comment from the perspective of the Wheatbelt region of Western Australia to the radio industry inquiry. Given the social benefits of radio broadcasting in non-metropolitan Australia, this submission is most concerned with highlighting gaps in access to ABC radio services and the benefits offered from community owned low-powered radio casting services.

Should you have any queries regarding these comments, please contact Ms Jenny Evans on (08) 9881 5888.

Yours sincerely

DAVID SINGE
CEO
WHEATBELT DEVELOPMENT COMMISSION

House of Representatives Standing
Committee on Communications,
Transport and the Arts
Submission No: 233
Date Received: 11/11/00
Secretary: Janet Holmes

Wednesday, October 25, 2000

Enc. WDC Submission

**House Committee on Communications, Transport and the Arts
Radio Industry Inquiry**

Submission by the Wheatbelt Development Commission
25 October 2000

Background

This submission has taken a region wide perspective. Given the social benefits of radio broadcasting in non-metropolitan Australia, we are most concerned here with highlighting gaps in access to ABC radio services and the benefits offered from community owned low-powered radio casting services.

The Wheatbelt region is one of Western Australia's nine regions defined in the Regional Development Commissions Act (WA), 1993. The region has a population of 72,000 and comprises an area of 155,000 square kilometres. The region is one of the oldest established areas of Australia. The longevity of settlement has produced an established network of infrastructure and a stable, evenly spread population base conducive to economic growth and development. The region has four sub-regional centres and over 170 separate communities. The primary economic activities of the region are agriculture, mining, fishing and tourism.

The Wheatbelt Development Commission (the Commission) is a Western Australian State Government agency committed to maximising the well being of our communities. The Commission has released a strategic plan for the region that outlines a number of issues that are relevant to the terms of reference of the radio industry inquiry in regional Australia. These issues will be expanded under the stated terms of reference.

The social benefits and influence on the general public of radio broadcasting in non-metropolitan Australia in comparison to other media sectors

The provision of information services is one of the major issues confronting regional communities and the issue is one of equity of access rather than of technology. In other words it is imperative for our continued development that we have access to the same level of services as the State capitals. Recent State Government planning projections for the Wheatbelt region indicate that future population growth in the region will be strongest along the coast to the north of Perth and in the 'Avon Arc' shires to the East of Perth. The majority of the region's population base is within two-hour car travel of Perth. As such, there is significant demand in the region for a comparable suite of radio services to the Perth metropolitan area.

"Quality of life" issues have a significant impact on development. There is a need for areas such as ours to not only have an excellent quality of life but also that people considering investing and living here do not have a negative perception of our area. The provision of services, such as the full suite of ABC radio services, contributes considerably to overcoming these negative perceptions.

The 'McKinsey Report' identified that businesses cite telecommunications as the most significant/critical factor in their decision process when choosing a location for their business. Business rated their top four needs as follows:

1. Telecommunications 55%
2. Road transport 48%
3. Lifestyle factors 44%
4. Energy/water supplies 43%

The provision of quality digital communications and data transmission services is an essential component of business attraction and expansion, and is fundamental to the growth of our region. The region's industries depend upon access and interpretation of market information and global innovation. Radio is a fundamental medium to deliver this information.

Wheatbelt region Radio Services

- ABC Radio

ABC Classic FM

The communities of Northam and York receive this service on the 98.9 frequency (Northam/York). Despite demand for this service, the remainder of the Wheatbelt region does not receive ABC Classic FM. In February 2000 the Narrogin district gathered over 700 signatures to lobby for a Classic FM service in the Narrogin district.

Recommendation: It is recommended that the ABC Classic FM service is extended to the major sub-regional centres of the Wheatbelt region of Western Australia (Narrogin, Merredin and Moora).

ABC Triple J

The Wheatbelt region Triple J service is above average in most areas, however black spots remain in the southeast district and northern district. The Triple J service is received by most of the region on the 98.1 frequency (Inner West). However, in the southeast, the Shires of Wickepin, Kulin, Kondinin and Dumbleyung receive an inferior, patchy service and the Shire of Lake Grace receives no service at all. In the north, the Triple J service in the Shires of Moora, Victoria Plains and Wongan-Balidu is patchy or receives no service at all.

The 15-30 age demographic makes periodic complaint about the lack of the Triple J service in these areas. The lack of the popular youth radio service is noticed acutely during the seeding and harvest periods, when young people employed in the agricultural sector work long hours in a vehicle. The service is also significantly missed over the Christmas period because school and University students return from Perth for the holiday period to reduced radio services.

Recommendation: It is recommended that the ABC Triple J service is boosted and extended in the southeast district and northern district of the Wheatbelt region of Western Australia.

ABC Local Radio

The Wheatbelt region is adequately covered by the ABC Local Radio service. The northern shires are covered by the Geraldton frequency (Midwest Wheatbelt) and the central and southern shires are covered by the Albany frequency (Southcoast).

- HotFM

Three of the four sub-regional centres in the Wheatbelt region have a local HotFM radio station. The HotFM service provides a popular mix of commercial radio with local news, local advertising and community announcements. The HotFM service broadcast from Northam, Narrogin and Merredin is on a low frequency and the coverage footprint is approximately 40 kilometres from the town sites.

- York FM

Of the 170 Wheatbelt settlements, York is the only town with a community run radio service. The frequency is 101.3 (York). The York community formed a radio station committee and was successful in applying for an \$8000 CBF grant to purchase equipment. The Shire of York leases the YorkFM radio building to the committee for a meager price. YorkFM is three years old. The Commission has monitored the progress of YorkFM during that time.

The station delivers over twenty programs per week by volunteers. The programs cover an extraordinary range of local and regional issues. The presenters range in age from 14 to 70. The Commission has been impressed with the level of commitment and interest the station has generated in the town of 3000 people. The flow of information and ideas in York has significantly improved. The confidence building, communication and leadership skills the York volunteers have gained through the production of radio programs is immeasurable.

The YorkFM experience provides an excellent case study of the unique capacity building a community radio station generates in a community.

Recommendation: It is recommended that Federal Government provide additional financial support for low-powered radio narrow casting services where there is demand for community orientated application.

Future trends in radio broadcasting, including employment and career opportunities, in non-metropolitan Australia

Whilst the provision of radio infrastructure is not expected to earn remarkable revenue for the broadcaster, the provision of radio infrastructure by a government corporation has the capacity to act as a catalyst for economic growth and regional prosperity. The real 'economic benefits' of improved communications service provision, such as improved business efficiency and capacity building within a community have to be included into the consideration of decision makers, so that decisions are not based purely on the broadcasters ability to make a profit.

A by-product of upgrading and improving equity of access to communications infrastructure is improved appeal of rural living. Better communications could aid population dispersal and deflect many of the social problems which population density in other areas of Australia may cause.

The effect on individuals, families and small business in non-metropolitan Australia of networking of radio programming, particularly in relation to local news services, sport, community service announcements and other forms of local content

Currently farmers and rural subscribers are the last to receive access to Information Technology and multi-media services, yet they are the people who stand to benefit substantially from the new information systems and contribute significantly to the wealth of the nation. In the meantime, ABC radio delivers valuable information with regional and local applications. This is critical at the development stage of new industries and value-adding ventures. Radio programs keep primary producers informed as to what is going on in their industry. Radio communications can reduce the 'tyranny of distance' that has traditionally stultified emerging industries and innovation.

News

The ABC Local Radio news service is invaluable to the Wheatbelt region. The primary economic activities of the region are agriculture, mining and fishing which are reliant on weather and commodity prices. The ABC Local radio service provides daily reports on wool and grain prices, stock prices and weather reports. The News service is a valuable tool for the industries of the Wheatbelt region.

Entertainment

Entertainment is one of the major uses of radio equipment. Quality of life within the Wheatbelt is linked to ease of access to these services. As the region develops strategies to heighten the 'quality of life' appeal of the region, access to information channels is central to this agenda.

Community Service Announcements

Significant demand is placed on the ABC Local radio service and HotFM radio service, by not-for-profit community organisations and government agencies, to announce community fund raising events, meetings and information sessions. Radio is a reliable and cost-effective medium for regional groups to relay messages to the public.

Conclusion

In conclusion, access to the suite of ABC radio services in the Wheatbelt region needs to be expanded. The Commission also recommends that Federal Government provide additional financial support for low-powered radio narrow casting services where there is demand for community orientated application. This is based on the significant capacity building and social outcomes that can be achieved from community owned and managed radio stations.