



SENATOR THE HON STEPHEN CONROY

MINISTER FOR BROADBAND, COMMUNICATIONS AND THE DIGITAL ECONOMY
DEPUTY LEADER OF THE GOVERNMENT IN THE SENATE



Mrs Julia Irwin MP
Member for Fowler
Chair, Standing Committee on Petitions
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

22 DEC 2008

Dear Mrs Irwin ^{Julia}

ABC NewsRadio in Bendigo

Thank you for your letters dated 29 October 2008 and 26 November 2008 concerning petitions from the residents of Central Victoria which have been lodged with the Standing Committee on Petitions in relation to the proposed introduction of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's (ABC) NewsRadio service to Bendigo.

The Australian Government confirmed in the 2008-09 Budget that funding is to be made available for the ABC to rollout Stage 3 of the NewsRadio extensions. This is the final stage of the proposal to provide the NewsRadio service to transmission areas with a population of 10 000 or more.

The Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA) is responsible for the planning and regulation of broadcasting services, and it has concluded that there are a number of areas under Stage 3, including Bendigo, where suitable high power radio spectrum is not available, unless changes are made to existing spectrum allocations.

ACMA has accordingly proposed variations to the existing Bendigo Licence Area Plan (LAP) which would involve changes to the broadcasting arrangements for three community radio stations which currently operate under Temporary Community Broadcasting Licences: Goldfields Community Radio Co-Operative which operates as Fresh FM, Phoenix FM and Central Victorian Gospel Radio.

These would require Fresh FM and Phoenix FM, which currently use the 89.5 MHz frequency on a share time basis, moving to share a lower power frequency on 101.5 MHz with Central Victorian Gospel Radio. The new ABC NewsRadio service could then be transmitted on the 89.5 MHz high power frequency.

This proposal is consistent with the general planning principles for these services, under which the national broadcasters are allocated spectrum for high power, wide coverage services where possible, and community broadcasters' spectrum for low-medium power services.

The proposed LAP variation would enable the three community broadcasters to continue operating on their existing Temporary Community Broadcasting Licences, until the process to allocate a permanent community broadcasting licence can commence.

ACMA recently completed a community consultation process in relation to the proposed LAP variations. This process is provided so that all views can be considered before a final decision is made on the allocation of spectrum for particular radio services.

I am aware that there is support in some sections of the Bendigo community for the retention of the 89.5 MHz frequency for community radio purposes but it should also be recognised that the three community services are operating on temporary licences, with no guarantee of tenure and that broadcasting spectrum for Bendigo radio services is scarce.

I would also note that the Government considers that the extension of the ABC's NewsRadio service to large centres such as Bendigo is important and that it will be welcomed by many in the community. The scarcity of suitable broadcasting spectrum in this region means that not all of the community radio services may be able to be accommodated.

The timing of a decision on the proposed changes to the Bendigo Licence Area Plan is a matter for ACMA.

Thank you for bringing this matter to my attention. I hope this information assists the Committee in its consideration of this matter.

Yours sincerely

Stephen Conroy
Minister for Broadband,
Communications and the Digital Economy