

Senate Standing Committee on Environment, Communications and the Arts
Answers to Senate Estimates Questions on Notice
Supplementary Estimates Hearings October 2010
Broadband, Communications and the Digital Economy Portfolio
Department of Broadband, Communications and the Digital Economy

Question No: 104

Program No. 1.3

Hansard Ref: EC 87-88

Topic: Self Help Sites

Senator Fisher asked:

In respect of Victoria, firstly, can you detail exactly which existing analog self-help sites will be upgraded by broadcasters to digital and when? And, secondly, how many new digital infill facilities will be established by broadcasters, where will they be established and when they will be commissioned?

In respect of any further rollouts, if there are any planned, will the government be contracting with broadcasters to require them to roll out a minimum number of upgraded self-help sites or new digital fill-in sites so that the government can actually comply with its promise to give a six-month transition between switch-on of digital and switch-off of analog? If not, why not?

Answer:

In regional Victoria, the regional commercial television broadcasters have decided to upgrade four current self help retransmission sites to broadcast all local regional commercial digital services and any missing national digital services. The digital services at these locations are currently scheduled to commence as indicated below:

- Apollo Bay – 16 January 2011;
- Lorne – 16 January 2011;
- Jeeralang/Yinnar South – 9 February 2011;
- Boolara – 11 February 2011; and
- Howqua – 3 December 2010.

In addition to site upgrade at the five sites mentioned above the SBS will assist in the upgrade of three SBS self help sites in Regional Victoria at:

- Khancoban – April or May 2011;
- Tawonga South – April or May 2011; and
- Balranald – 15 December 2010.

The regional commercial television broadcasters have also decided to establish digital infill facilities to provide all local regional commercial and national digital services to the following areas, with planned commencement dates as follows:

- Ballarat East – 24 January 2011;
- Birchip – 23 December 2010;
- Charlton – commenced 12 November 2010;
- Inverloch – 23 December 2010;
- Koondrook/Barham – commenced 4 November 2010;
- Mt Cowley – 15 January 2011;

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- Newborough – 23 December 2010;
- Tanybryn – 15 January 2011;
- Terang – 6 December 2010;
- Timboon – 10 December 2010;
- Trafalgar/Yarragon – 18 December 2010;
- Warracknabeal – 23 December 2010.

On the matter of the six monthly window and contracts with regional broadcasters please see answer to Question 108.

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Question No: 105

Program No. 1.3

Hansard Ref: EC13

Topic: Audio description trial

Senator Ludlam asked:

Is there a timetable for when discussions on a funding appropriation and spectrum issues for the audio description is to be wrapped up?

Answer:

The Government is considering the complex policy and regulatory issues in this area in developing its final report to improve access to electronic media by the hearing and vision impaired. The report is expected to be released in the coming months, and will outline the Government's views on the issue.

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Question No: 106

Program No. 1.3

Hansard Ref: In Writing

Topic: Self Help Upgrade

Senator Fisher asked:

In respect to the Underbool self help upgrade and the new infill facilities at Ouyen and Robinvale in the initial Mildura switch-off area:

- What timeframes did homes within the coverage areas of these facilities have to assess the suitability of their new found digital reception and convert before their pre-existing analog TV transmissions were switched off?

Answer:

The new digital services for Underbool were provided as an upgrade of the existing analog self help services. The digital services started on 10 June 2010, the same day that analog services for the area were switched off. Digital services were provided on the same frequencies used by analog services and therefore a period of simulcasting was not possible.

The new digital services in Ouyen commenced 4 May 2010. There were no analog self help services at Ouyen. The pre-existing analog services from the main Mildura transmission site continued until 30 June 2010.

The new digital services for Robinvale commenced 25 June 2010. There were no analog self help services at Robinvale and the pre-existing analog services from the main Mildura transmission site continued until 30 June 2010.

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Question No: 107

Program No. 1.3

Hansard Ref: In Writing

Topic: Self Help Sites

Senator Fisher asked:

What contractual or legal obligations has the Government put in place to ensure:

- Broadcasters upgrade a minimum number of analog self-help facilities,
- Provide a minimum number of new digital in fill facilities,
- Start all of them at least 6 months before the proposed switch-off date for analog in the local area?

Answer:

See answer to Question 108.

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Question No: 108

Program No. 1.3

Hansard Ref: In Writing

Topic: Self Help Sites

Senator Fisher asked:

Has a contract been entered into to ensure broadcasters roll out the number of upgraded self-help sites and new digital in fill sites- at least 6 months before the proposed switch-off date in each area?

- If not, why not?

Answer:

The Government has not entered into a contract with broadcasters for this purpose. It is a matter for commercial broadcasters whether they convert self-help sites or establish additional digital facilities in their licence areas, and they are doing so at their own cost. The Department is working cooperatively with commercial broadcasters and liaises regularly with broadcasters in order to coordinate the communication, assistance and technical programs of the Government with the transmission planning of broadcasters.

Where commercial broadcasters decide to upgrade a current self help facility, the *Broadcasting Services Act 1992* requires that they inform the Australian Communications and Media Authority at least nine months prior to the switchover in the area of their intention to do so. This requirement will apply to the Regional Queensland switchover in the 2nd half 2011 and to subsequent switchover regions – for earlier switchover regions the requirement is to inform the Authority before the switchover date for the area. The requirement to provide this information nine months before switchover does not represent a binding commitment to upgrade the site prior to switchover.

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Question No: 109

Program No. 1.3

Hansard Ref: In Writing

Topic: Self Help Sites

Senator Fisher asked:

Did the Minister write to analog self-help licensees earlier this year including an invitation for them to establish a digital terrestrial self-help facility as an alternative for homes within those communities all converting to direct to home (DTH) TV reception?

- If so, how many licensees were written to?
- How many of these licensees would need to use the new VAST satellite program as the source of its commercial TV services if it wished to take up the Minister's digital terrestrial self-help alternative?

Answer:

No, the Minister did not write to analog self-help licensees earlier this year including an invitation for them to establish a digital terrestrial self-help facility as an alternative to converting to direct to home TV reception. The Minister wrote to 362 self-help licensees to inform them about the options available to them for receiving digital television services. For licensees whose self-help facility was not being converted to digital by the broadcasters, one of the options given was that they could upgrade their facility themselves.

The self-help licensees that would need to use the VAST service as the source of their commercial TV services if they wished to retransmit their services terrestrially would be those licensees that are unable to access a terrestrial signal to retransmit.

It is difficult to say precisely how many licensees this might be. However, it would include all licensees of self-help sites located in the remote licence areas as these sites currently retransmit the Aurora service terrestrially. Letters were sent to 265 remote area licensees in the Remote Central and Eastern Australia, and Regional and Remote Western Australia licence areas.

There are also a small number of self-help sites outside of the remote licence areas which currently retransmit the Aurora service. If these sites are not able to receive a signal from a terrestrial transmitter, and the affected communities do not wish to move to direct-to-home reception of the VAST service, they would need to retransmit the VAST service. Some of these sites will be served by new gap filler transmitters to be established by the broadcasters. Broadcasters have not yet determined the final list of gap filler sites to be established.

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Question No: 110

Program No. 1.3

Hansard Ref: In Writing

Topic: VAST free-to air TV satellite platform

Senator Fisher asked:

What steps did the Department take during the development of the new VAST free-to-air TV satellite platform to safeguard the interests of existing analog or new self-help groups to be able to establish digital terrestrial self-help facilities using the commercial TV channels on VAST as the source of channels to retransmit?

Answer:

See answer to Question 111.

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Question No: 111

Program No. 1.3

Hansard Ref: In Writing

Topic: VAST free-to air TV satellite platform

Senator Fisher asked:

Did the Department conduct any evaluation of whether the technical parameters of the VAST platform announced on 14 April would make it more expensive and technically more complex for small communities to establish digital terrestrial self-help facilities using VAST as the source of commercial TV channels for retransmission?

Answer:

The VAST service has been established as a direct to home satellite service and not a distribution system to serve self-help or other retransmission sites.

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Question No: 112

Program No. 1.3

Hansard Ref: In Writing

Topic: VAST

Senator Fisher asked:

Has the Department:

- a. Taken steps to ensure VAST DTH set top boxes (STBs) were available in the marketplace prior to the switch-off date in Mildura;
- b. Taken an interest in the cost to consumers of those VAST STBs;
- c. Provided web and printed material advising homes of what they need to do to avail themselves of the VAST DTH satellite system;
- d. Development a subsidy scheme for homes within the coverage areas of existing analogue self-help facilities to assist them to convert to VAST; and
- e. Visited many locations to explain the purpose of and how to convert to VAST?

Answer:

- a. The Funding Deed for the delivery of the VAST service provided for a sufficient number of VAST STBs to be available in the Mildura/Sunraysia licence area before the commencement of the satellite service.
- b. The Department requested and was provided with costings for the VAST STBs.
- c. Information about the VAST service is included in web and printed material published by the Digital Switchover Taskforce. Households that may be eligible for a satellite subsidy will be contacted by letter when the scheme opens in that area and invited to test their eligibility for assistance. The Digital Ready website, at www.digitalready.gov.au/subsidy, provides information about the scheme, including how to apply.
- d. The Australian Government has funded a Satellite Subsidy Scheme to subsidise the installation of VAST for households that rely on a TV signal received from an existing self-help tower that is not being converted to digital. The Scheme is in operation.
- e. Departmental officers have visited a number of self-help locations in regional South Australia, Victoria and remote Queensland, to explain the purpose of the VAST and raise awareness of the Satellite Subsidy Scheme.

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Question No: 113

Program No. 1.3

Hansard Ref: In Writing

Topic: Self Help Sites

Senator Fisher asked:

Could the Department provide details of where it has:

- a. Provided web and printed material advising homes of what they need to do to establish a digital terrestrial self-help facility;
- b. Publish any technical design for such or even where prospective licensees might go to avail themselves of such reliable information;
- c. Assist prospective licensees with any applications to ACMA for the necessary spectrum licenses; or
- d. Visited any location for the purpose of assisting existing analog self-help licensees to examine the digital terrestrial self-help alternative offered by the Government?

Answer:

The Department does not provide information or assistance to homes or communities about establishment of digital self help facilities. Decisions about whether or not to establish such facilities, or to upgrade existing facilities which are not on the broadcasters' upgrade list, are matters for the local community. The relevant local authorities will need to contact the Australian Communications and Media Authority about the availability of suitable television spectrum and other technical matters. While the Department has visited a number of locations to demonstrate the VAST satellite service and explain the operation of the Satellite Subsidy Scheme, the Government does not offer a digital terrestrial self help alternative.

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Question No: 114

Program No. 1.3

Hansard Ref: In Writing

Topic: Self Help Sites

Senator Fisher asked:

The Department is administering a \$99 million Satellite Subsidy Scheme (SSS) to assist homes within the coverage areas to analog self-help facilities to convert to the DTH VAST satellite platform.

- a. To what extent were the homes within, or the licensees, consulted about the scale, scope and conditions associated with the development of the SSS?
- b. Did the Department request or receive one submission from these homes or licensees as it was developing the detail of the SSS?
- c. Why are schools, community facilities, hospitals, medical clinics, tourist facilities or not for profit businesses being excluded from the SSS?
- d. Does the Department have estimates of the:
 - i. Number of such schools, community facilities, hospitals, medical clinics, tourist facilities or not for profit businesses being excluded;
 - ii. The number of analog TV devices they use;
 - iii. How their patients, clients or customers use those TV facilities; and
 - iv. The cost of converting all of those facilities to VAST and replicating the current viewing functionality available from them?

Answer:

- a. On 30 March 2010, the Minister for Broadband, Communications and the Digital Economy wrote to licensees of self help towers and advised them of the options that were available to communities currently reliant of self help towers that were not being converted to digital by the broadcasters.

During the development phase of the SSS, the Department also discussed the proposed scheme at meetings of the Digital Switchover Taskforce Consumer Expert Group. This group includes representation from a cross section of Australian consumers.

The Department is also actively engaging with local authorities and communities in advance of the delivery of the SSS, for example to conduct demonstrations of the VAST satellite service. The SSS itself operates by inviting individual eligible households to indicate whether they wish to opt in to the scheme.

- b. See answer to (a) above.
- c. The Scheme has been established to recognise the investment made by households in establishing and running community analog self-help towers, and to ensure that the

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cost for these households to install VAST satellite reception equipment is minimised. For this reason the Scheme is restricted to householders who live in or own an eligible residential dwelling and is not available to business premises.

Places of business are excluded from the Scheme as they are not residential premises. This includes commercial accommodation operations such as: hotels, motels, serviced apartments, and short-term rental caravans and cabins located in a caravan or holiday park. Mixed-use businesses that incorporate a residential dwelling component within the premise – such as some general stores or B&B's – may be eligible for one subsidy for the residential component of the-premise, provided that all other eligibility criteria are met.

In addition to the above, operations such as: hospitals, educational facilities, defence barracks, and corrective or detention facilities are also excluded from the Scheme as they also do not constitute a residential dwelling.

- d. i. No.
- ii. No
- iii. No
- iv. No