

NEW PROCESS FOR HIGH POWER NARROWCASTING SERVICES

The ABA has announced new procedures for allocating licences to provide high power, radio narrowcasting services.

Narrowcasting services are limited in some way, by scope of programming, location or period of operation.

Under the new system, the ABA will publicise the availability of a high power channel for narrowcasting and call for expressions of interest.

Until now, the ABA has allocated licences for high powered narrowcasting services on a first come, first served basis. This worked well while demand was low, but an increase in demand for these channels has caused the ABA to review its procedures.

The ABA has introduced a fairer and more manageable system for issuing transmitter licences for high power narrowcasting services,' said ABA Chairman, Mr Brian Johns. 'The new system will ensure the public is informed of channels becoming available and won't divert ABA resources away from planning broadcasting services around Australia.'

The ABA has recently released its draft priority listing for planning radio and television channels (see pp. 4, 5).

The availability of high power channels will be dependent upon the determination of the ABA's final planning priorities, due for release on 30 July 1993. As a result of the change in procedure, the ABA has decided to refuse 40 applications to use high power channels for narrowcasting: 'We invite this group to apply for high power licences when they become available in their area,' Mr Johns said.

'When planning has been completed in a particular area, we look forward to the introduction of new radio services. If there are enough channels available, narrowcasters should be able to enter into a longer term arrangement than can be offered now. We see narrowcasting as an important part of the mix of services within a market.'

The ABA has received 640 applications for transmitter licences for narrowcasting services since 5 October 1992. The ABA has dealt with more than two hundred applications and is considering ways to speed up processing of the remaining four hundred applications for low power channels in the 87.5MHz - 88.0MHz range on the FM band.

HIGH POWER NARROWCASTING SERVICES

High power narrowcasting services are those licensed to use transmitters with a coverage of more than two kilometres in urban areas and ten kilometres in rural areas.

PLANNING PROCESS

Following the release of the priorities determination on 30 July, licence area plans, which set out the number, technical characteristics and licence area of all broadcasting bands services to be available in each area, will be developed for each of the planning zones.

It is envisaged that licence areas that are low on the list of priorities will be treated differently in regard to high power transmitter licences for narrowcasting purposes than those licence areas that are high on the priorities list.

As it will more be than two years before planning is completed in low priority licence areas, the ABA will consider calling for expressions of interest in the temporary use of channels that have already been planned (e.g. AM frequencies vacated by commercial stations that converted to FM). These channels will be made available until the licence area plan has been completed.

High priority licence areas will only have to wait a short time until a licence area plan has been completed, so it will not be necessary to make special interim arrangements for narrowcasting services.

Q & A

Why has the ABA changed its process for dealing with applications for high power transmitter licences for open narrowcast services?

The ABA has received hundreds of applications and enquiries about access to the broadcasting bands. The ABA has also been looking at ways to handle applications for access to wide coverage channels in advance of the formal licence area planning process, so that access is properly planned and it is equal for all interested parties.

Why is the ABA proceeding in this way?

Although there is no formal legislative requirement for the ABA to release spectrum through a public process, we have decided on public policy and natural justice grounds that an expression of interest procedure is appropriate. The process allows all interested persons to make their views known to the ABA before a decision is made to make spectrum available.

How long will it take until channels are available?

Until the ABA determines its planning priorities, we have no way of knowing the period of time for which the channels will be available. It could range from six months to two years. Since competing claims may need to be resolved through a tender process, the duration of availability will be an essential consideration for the ABA and the applicant or applicants.

For this reason the ABA has decided not to release any further high power channels until after the planning priorities have been determined. It will then consider the release of channels for use until planning of the particular region is completed. It will not have the resources to undertake detailed planning work for new channel assignments. In other words, only channels which have been used within a market or are planned fully for use in a market would be made available. Other channels requiring engineering assessment will not be considered.

