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# Draft commercial television digital conversion scheme

The ABA has released its draft Commercial Television Conversion Scheme (the CTC Scheme) for public comment.

The CTC Scheme empowers the ABA to determine the policies, methods and procedures it will use to achieve conversion of commercial television transmissions from analog mode to digital mode.

'Television transmissions in digital mode must commence in Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane, Adelaide and Perth on 1 January 2001,' said Mr Gareth Grainger, Acting ABA Chairman.

'Regional broadcasters have indicated to the ABA that they also wish to commence digital television transmissions on 1 January 2001 in Newcastle, Central Coast of NSW, Wollongong, Canberra, Toowoomba, Sunshine Coast, Gold Coast, Bunbury, Hobart and Darwin. This means almost eighty per cent of Australians will potentially have access to digital television transmissions on 1 January 2001.'

'The ABA must complete the administrative arrangements for conversion as soon as possible, in order to give

broadcasters sufficient time to establish and test their digital transmission facilities,' he said.

A draft Regulation Impact Statement and explanatory paper outlining the key features of the CTC Scheme were also released. All material is available on the ABA web site, <[www.aba.gov.au](http://www.aba.gov.au)>.

The draft National Television Conversion Scheme will be published for comment as soon as practicable. However, certain features of the CTC Scheme will be common to both schemes.

The CTC Scheme is divided into Parts A and B.

Part A deals with digital conversion for metropolitan and regional licence areas. Part B deals with digital conversion for remote licence areas. Part B of the scheme is not contained in this current draft CTC Scheme but will be released in draft form as soon as practicable.

Submissions on the CTC Scheme closed on 27 November 1998. The time allowed for receiving submissions was designed to maximise the prospects of the ABA finalising the digital conversion schemes by late 1998 or early 1999. This would then provide certainty



about the conversion process for broadcasters and other interested parties.

## Digital conversion

The *Television Broadcasting Services (Digital Conversion) Act 1998*, which introduced 11 new parts to the *Broadcasting Services Act 1992*, was passed by the Australian Parliament in July 1998.

The Digital Conversion Act requires the ABA to develop legislative schemes for the conversion of commercial and national television broadcasting services from analog to digital mode over time—a Commercial Television Conversion Scheme and a National Television Conversion Scheme (for the ABC and SBS). The schemes must be tabled in Parliament and are subject

to Parliamentary disallowance. The CTC Scheme represents delegated, or subordinate, legislation.

## Policy objectives of the CTC Scheme

The Digital Conversion Act outlines a number of policy objectives which the scheme must be directed towards achieving. These objectives are summarised as:

- each holder of a television broadcasting licence in a metropolitan area is required to commence transmissions in digital mode on 1 January 2001;
- each holder of a television broadcasting licence in a regional area is required to commence transmissions in digital mode on a date to be determined by the ABA be-





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tween 1 January 2001 and 1 January 2004;

- there is to be a simulcast period of eight years (or longer where prescribed) during which broadcasters are to transmit their television programs in both analog and digital mode;
- throughout the simulcast period, broadcasters should be authorised, under one or more transmitter licences, to use one or more additional channels to transmit their television service in digital mode;
- the additional channels for digital transmissions should occupy the same amount of bandwidth as the channels used for analog transmissions;
- broadcasters must meet standards relating to high definition television (HDTV) format transmission of television programs in digital mode;
- broadcasters must meet standards relating to captioning of television programs for the deaf and hearing impaired;
- as soon as is practicable after the start of the simulcast period for an area, the digital transmissions should achieve the same level of coverage and potential reception quality as the analog transmissions;
- during the simulcast period, there should, as far as is practicable, be co-location of transmitters used for analog and digital transmissions;
- at the end of the simulcast period, analog transmissions are to cease and any channels not going to be used to continue transmissions in digital mode are to be surrendered;
- holders of television broadcasting licences should be permitted to use any spare transmission capacity to provide datacasting services;
- the ABA should consult holders of television broadcasting licences about the im-

plementation of the schemes;

- owners and operators of broadcasting transmission towers must give digital broadcasters and datacasters access to the towers for the purpose of installing and maintaining digital transmitters;
- if the implementation of the schemes affects particular broadcasting transmission towers, the ABA should consult the owners and operators of those towers.

These objectives are set out in full in sections 6 and 19 of the Digital Conversion Act.

### Digital channel plan

The ABA is empowered under the draft conversion schemes to develop a Digital Channel Plan (DCP). The DCP will determine which channels are to be allotted to each broadcaster and the technical characteristics of those channels. The ABA's objective in preparing the DCP is to plan the channel allotments to enable a broadcaster to plan its digital transmission coverage to match its analog coverage. The DCP will plan for up to eight digital television services (corresponding to the five analog services to be converting in each area and additional channels) and also identify any additional capacity available for datacasting or other uses.

The ABA is developing the DCP for all licence areas of Australia as soon as practicable. It is being assisted in this task by the Digital Television Channel Planning Consultative Group, which consists of representatives from the ABA, the Federation of Australian Commercial Television Stations, commercial broadcasters, the ABC, SBS, the Australian Communications Authority, the Communications Laboratory, the National

Transmission Agency, Foxtel and Optus Vision.

### General technical assumptions

In preparing the DCP, the ABA must make technical assumptions in relation to planning parameters, measurement methods and best practice. It will be mandatory for the ABA to publish a definition of what constitutes 'the same level of coverage and potential reception quality as is achieved by the transmission of that service in analog mode in that area'. The ABA may also make publicly available any other technical assumptions. These are to be known as the 'General Technical Assumptions'. The General Technical Assumptions can also be used for the detailed planning by broadcasters of transmission facilities for digital television.

### Implementation plans

An Implementation Plan is a binding commitment by a licensee to provide digital services from specified sites to cover specified areas by specified dates so as to achieve the same coverage as the analog service as soon as practicable after the simulcast period begins. It is subject to ABA approval.

An Implementation Plan for the entire licence area must be prepared and submitted to the ABA for approval after the DCP for the licence area has been completed and before a date to be set by the ABA. For metropolitan areas this date will represent a specified period before 1 January 2001. The ABA will consult on what this date should be.

For regional areas this date will be a specified period before the earliest of: 1 January 2004; or the date determined

by the ABA under clause 6(3)(b) of the Schedule for that licence area (the simulcast date).

Where a regional licensee wishes to commence service in part of its licence area before the simulcast date, the ABA has a discretion to allow the licensee to lodge an Implementation Plan for that part of its licence area.

The ABA and the licensee must agree on a date on which the licensee wishes to commence digital transmission in accordance with an approved Implementation Plan for that part of the licence area (the agreed start-up date).

The Implementation Plan submission and approval procedure then operate as for any other Implementation Plan, as though part of a licence area is a licence area. The Implementation Plan must be lodged after the DCP for that part of the licence area is complete and before a date to be set by the ABA.

### End of the simulcast period

At the end of the simulcast period, all transmissions in analog mode must cease. A licensee may elect to continue transmitting in digital mode using the channels it used for digital transmission during the simulcast period. This would require the surrender of all transmitter licences authorising analog transmission.

Alternatively, a licensee may elect to transmit in digital mode using the channels that were used for analog transmission during the simulcast period. This would require the surrender of all transmitter licences authorising digital transmission on the additional channels.