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ABA welcomes extra funding for digital television

I warmly welcome the announcement from Senator the Hon. Richard Alston, Minister for Communications, Information Technology and the Arts, that extra funding will be provided to the ABA to facilitate the conversion of television broadcasting to digital transmission,' said Professor David Flint, ABA Chairman. 'An extra \$500 000 will be made available this financial year with follow up funding for upcoming years to be considered in the near future.'

'The ABA has diverted resources from analog radio planning to digital television planning to meet the tight time frame Parliament has set for digital conversion. This extra funding will greatly assist the ABA in carrying out its important planning tasks in both the analog and digital areas,' said Professor Flint.

'Unfortunately, the timetable for planning analog radio services in the metropolitan markets has slipped but we will now be able to move forward more quickly than we would otherwise have been able,' he said.

ABA priorities

'The ABA has decided that its priorities will be to complete

technical planning for the 15 television markets where digital television transmissions will commence on 1 January 2001 and the two largest analog radio markets of Sydney and Melbourne. This will be immediately followed by the Brisbane, Adelaide and Perth radio markets.'

In terms of analog planning, the ABA will plan the Sydney radio market first, followed by the Melbourne market.

'The volume of expressions of interest in new commercial services is much greater for Sydney than for any other market,' said Professor Flint. 'Planning for the Sydney market is also well advanced in technical terms, with both a technical options booklet and an information booklet having been released for public comment in the last two years. The Sydney and Melbourne markets have roughly the same number of active aspirant community radio groups.'

'It is expected that the draft licence area plans for Sydney and Melbourne will be available in 1999. We hope this can be done by the middle of the year. As soon as possible after this, we expect to release the drafts for Brisbane, Adelaide and Perth. We hope this will be early in the year 2000, but we will try to do this in late 1999 if this is possible.'

Warning to consumers about 'digital' television sets

Consumers should be wary about buying what are alleged to be 'digital' or 'digital ready' television sets, according to the ABA and the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission.

Sets currently on sale which bill themselves as digital may use digital signal processing systems to create a better picture from the analog transmissions currently broadcast by television stations, but they will not be able to receive and display the digital signals due to begin in 2001. They are in essence still analog sets and viewers will not be able to use them to enjoy the enhanced features of digital television. 'A number of people have called the ABA about "digital" television sets they have seen advertised or for sale,' said Professor David Flint, ABA Chairman. 'The ABA is most anxious that consumers have clear information before spending perhaps thousands of dollars on such equipment. Television sets able to receive digital television transmissions are not currently available on the Australian market.' The ACCC has emphasised that any such advertising may be misleading and could be breaching Australia's trade practices law. Digital television broadcasting must commence in the mainland metropolitan markets on 1 January 2001. Digital television receivers which will be able to pick up the new digital signals will not be available until mid 2000, according to industry sources. Because the final technical specifications for the Australian digital television transmission system will not be finalised until early 1999, Australian manufacturers have not yet started building prototype sets. Because the Australian system will be slightly different than the American or European systems, it will not simply be a matter of importing sets from overseas.

It is likely that digital set top boxes, which convert the digital signal back to analog form so that existing analog receivers will be able to display it, will be the first new item of digital hardware to become available. While not enabling viewers to see the enhanced features of the digital signal, like high definition, these will provide clearer, sharper pictures for viewers in built-up areas or hilly terrain who have problems with interference and ghosting. A fully integrated digital television receiver will follow.