

Hundreds write

to regional radio inquiry



House Communications Committee Chairman Paul Neville (left) and Deputy Chairman Steve Gibbons discuss the submissions received for the regional radio inquiry.

Regional Australia is all fired-up about the adequacy of its radio services. More than 270 submissions have been received for the regional radio inquiry being conducted by the House of Representatives Communications Committee.

The House Communications Committee is examining the need for Federal Government action on the quantity and quality of radio services in regional Australia. Under consideration are the services provided by the ABC and by commercial and community broadcasters.

Changes in the regulatory environment and developments in technology have led to substantial changes in the ownership of radio. One of the main results has been the growth of commercial radio networks.

"In the submissions we have received there are some very strong claims that these changes have led to the loss of localism in radio," said House Communications Committee Chairman, Paul Neville

(Member for Hinkler, Queensland). "This is of great concern in itself as radio occupies a unique and important place in rural life."

Concern about difficulties in disseminating emergency information as a result of networking has emerged as a key issue. "We have evidence from the NSW State Emergency Service, the Bureau of Meteorology and the Country Fire Authority in Victoria that they are having more difficulty in getting early warning and other announcements broadcast since the networking of stations," Mr Neville said.

"Networking has both benefits and costs. We will tease these out and rigorously test the evidence on all the issues that are relevant to this inquiry."

Fine-tuning regional radio

The House of Representatives Communications Committee inquiry into the adequacy of radio services in regional Australia is looking into a number of important issues:

- ? Should the Government take action to improve the quantity and quality of radio services in regional Australia?
- ? What are the benefits and influence of radio broadcasting in regional Australia?
- ? What effect does the networking of radio programs have on people living and working in non-metropolitan Australia (particularly in relation to local content, local news and sports services, and local community service announcements)?
- ? Will new technologies, such as digital radio, allow for more localised radio services?

For more information on the inquiry

Visit: www.aph.gov.au/house/committee/cta

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There are strong claims that changes have led to the loss of localism in radio.

The House Communications Committee has already visited Bathurst, Brisbane, Longreach, Melbourne, Tamworth and Townsville, holding public hearings and public meetings. Evidence has been taken from the peak industry bodies, major broadcasters, the ABC, numerous community stations, emergency services organisations, individuals with a background in regional radio and many individual radio listeners.

"A key question of this inquiry is whether the Broadcasting Services Act has been successful, or whether changes need to be made. We are keen to build up a picture of what regional radio should look like, how it should be regulated and what form that should take," said Mr Neville.

"As with most things it is a question of balance. We will be looking for solutions which recognise the reality of the commercial and other considerations faced by all sectors of the radio industry and which, at the same time, ensure the community has access to a diverse range of quality radio services."



At public hearings in Tamworth the House Communications Committee heard from various community groups, including community radio station 2UNE. Left to Right: 2UNE assistant station manager Andrew Devenish-Mearns, station manager Michael Pollard and station assistant Jack McCain. Photo: Geoff O'Neill, Northern Daily Leader, Tamworth



House Communications Committee members visited the studios of ABC's Triple J in Sydney to discuss issues relevant to the regional radio inquiry. Photo: ABC

What the inquiry has heard

"New technologies mean that in many cases we are able to ensure that our programs contain more local news, weather, current affairs, sport and other items of significance, than at any time in the past. That is because many announcers in the past were not convinced that local material was of enough interest to broadcast. So they passed over it and just kept on with their other material. This cannot happen today."

Submission No. 106, DMG Radio Australia

"DMG Radio offer absolutely NO local news content . . . local sports news was discarded shortly after DMG assumed ownership . . . the so-called local radio station is programmed and operated from Townsville and further afield. An announcer sits in a studio and pretends to be working in Charters Towers! All that remains here is a studio linked by satellite to elsewhere, a staff of two, whose prime task is to gather advertising revenue."

Submission No. 123, Bill Tittley, Charters Towers, Queensland

"Networking has caused a reduction in the level of local access to the airwaves, and local emergency managers increasingly find it impossible to disseminate vital information to the community."

Submission No. 136, New South Wales State Emergency Service

"Companies such as the British-owned DMG Group have reduced once-proud commercial stations such as 4CA, 2WG, 4ZR, 4GC (to name but a few) to little more than relay stations with a skeleton staff. I am of the opinion that 4GC has no staff. Drastic cuts have not been in the public interest as localism has been destroyed. I can recall lying on a beach on the Queensland Sunshine Coast in glorious sunshine listening to a 'NSW sheep weather alert' on the local station 4GY."

Submission No. 160, 4KZ

"Since the late 1980s the consolidation of ownership of regional radio stations has led to networking of radio content. This has been a total disaster for country radio audiences. More radio stations via supplementary licences may have increased variety – but the quality, and most importantly the relevance to communities those radio stations are meant to serve, has suffered."

Submission No. 32, Angelos Frangopoulos, Frenchs Forest, New South Wales

"While most of the local takeovers have been in NSW they are gradually encroaching on other states and, unchecked, will devastate regional commercial radio. Their programmes are mainly to please Sydney listeners and national advertisers, and profit is the driving force. People are the least of their concerns."

Submission No. 61, Tom Baker, Toowoomba, Queensland