

# Radio... What radio?



*The House Communications Committee held a public meeting on regional radio in Walpole, WA.*

Radio black-spots have emerged as a key issue in the House of Representatives Communications Committee inquiry into the adequacy of radio services in regional Australia. This follows the Committee's recent visit to Western Australia and the Northern Territory.

Appearing before the House Communications Committee in Perth and Darwin, the Western Australian and Northern Territory Governments highlighted the fact that vast areas in WA and the NT do not get radio coverage. They stressed the need to remedy the situation, given the vital role that radio plays in communications for people living in regional areas.

While acknowledging the difficulties caused by demographics and geography, both governments called for steps to be taken to ensure radio coverage along highways, and for the expansion of the black-spot funding program (currently for television reception) to include black-spots in radio reception.

## *Bring us up to speed with the rest of the world.*

Many people travelled several hundred kilometres to attend a public meeting held by the House Communications Committee in the mid-west regional town of Geraldton. Voicing a range of concerns, they described to the Committee their frustration that:

- the short-wave radio service withdrawn in 1994 has not been replaced with anything, as promised at the time;
- satellite radio, available in some homesteads, has little value for those travelling through the region or for pastoralists working outside their homes; and
- ABC transmitters located along the coast sometimes went out during cyclones or other critical periods, when emergency announcements needed to be made.

Solutions flagged at the Geraldton meeting included the establishment of a powerful inland AM transmitter and the creation of regional licences for commercial broadcasters.

At a second public meeting, held in Walpole, it was brought home to the Communications Committee that the lack of radio services was not confined to the more remote areas of WA. Set in the forests of south Western Australia and located on a busy tourist highway, Walpole receives only a limited amount of fortuitous radio coverage, depending literally on which way the wind blows. Although Walpole is only 120 km west of the major regional centre of Albany, it is out of range of the ABC's regional radio transmitter

in Albany and outside the licence area of Albany's commercial station. Walpole residents made clear to the Committee that they were totally perplexed by the situation.

"If we can put men on the moon, and have all these communications," said one Walpole resident, "surely, even with our trees being a potential problem for radio waves, there must be some way that we can do something to bring us up to speed with the rest of the world."

As with other regions of Australia, radio's importance in broadcasting essential information during emergency situations featured strongly in the evidence given to the House Communications Committee in Walpole. A representative from the Walpole Office of the Department of Conservation and Land Management described the irony of the situation when, during a recent bushfire within close range of the town, Walpole residents relied on family and friends in Albany for information about the fire.

"The stories that we have heard in Western Australia and the Northern Territory have given us a new perspective on the issues that are part of this inquiry," said Paul Neville, Communications Committee Chairman and Member for Hinkler (Queensland).

"Much of the evidence that we have received while visiting the eastern regions of Australia has been about the impact that concentration of ownership and networking has had on the local feel of radio. By contrast, in the areas that we have just visited in Western Australia and the Northern Territory some people have no radio at all.

"There are some very serious issues that we will be discussing with the ABC and the Australian Broadcasting Authority before we finish the public hearing phase of this inquiry," Mr Neville said.

The House Communications Committee expects to complete its public hearing program in early May.

### **For further information**

Visit: [www.aph.gov.au/house/committee/cta](http://www.aph.gov.au/house/committee/cta)

Call: (02) 6277 4601

Email: [janet.holmes.reps@aph.gov.au](mailto:janet.holmes.reps@aph.gov.au)