

We Can't Pay, We Won't Pay

Late in February, community organisations like Surf Lifesaving Australia and the NSW Volunteer Rescue Association, started hearing rumours about the introduction of hefty new radio apparatus license fees.

Then the 'please pay' notices started arriving from the Federal Government's Spectrum Management Agency. Surf Lifesaving Australia - which coordinates 260 surf lifesaving clubs and their 70,000 members - is facing a total bill of \$80,000 a year to ensure its continued access to the radio spectrum. Meanwhile, the NSW Volunteer Rescue Association - a non-profit organisation which responds to around 10,000 accidents every year - has to find \$22,000 for the new fee.

The Spectrum Management Agency, which is implementing a general review of the Apparatus Licence System is facing revolt from more than 100 similar non-profit community service groups including volunteer bushfire brigades and ambulance services. The response, almost across the board, is: 'we can't pay, we won't pay.'

At the centre of the controversy is a three-tier charge on all licence holders consisting of a spectrum access tax, a maintenance charge and an administrative charge.

Despite offering licence holders involved in 'safety of life' activities exemption from the spectrum access tax, the SMA is determined to collect the other charges from public and community groups.

According to Paul Palmer of the SMA, the new system is aimed at rationalising the number of licences available as well as introducing 'efficiency, equity and transparency'. He says the SMA currently raises \$100 million a year in licence fees while spending just \$30 million.

It's that sort of surplus which has community groups so perplexed.

'We've gone from zero to \$22,000 in one hit,' said Ray Gill of the NSW

Volunteer Rescue Association. 'That's a lot of chook raffles.'

He said the VRA - which assisted and rescued 10,892 people in 1994 - does not have a mechanism for collecting the fees from each of the Association's 74 squads.

'Perhaps we'll have to ask the SMA to deal with each separate squad for us,' he suggested.

General Manager of Surf Lifesaving Australia, Denis Hewssner told *CU*: 'It's horrific - no-one can justify hitting any rescue organisation with a charge like this'.

Community broadcasters are also alarmed at the impost especially as they are being forced to pay the tax component.

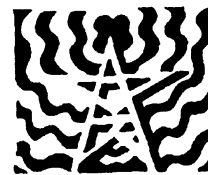
The Community Broadcasting Association of Australia (CBAA) which represents around 140 community radio stations and six community TV stations around the country, has been lobbying the Minister's office since July last year. Community TV stations in Melbourne and Sydney are being hit with a \$3000 charge - double the current fee.

'It's totally absurd to be taxed to deliver a community service,' said Ada Hulshoff - a broadcasting industry representative on the SMA's advisory body, the Radiocommunications Consultative Council (RCC).

The RCC looked at this issue in 1993 and its advice to the SMA left the way open for charges on public and community spectrum users to be waived.

With a federal election looming and the possibility that bushfire fighters, lifesavers and community broadcasters will be forced into a confrontation with the Government, it's likely the issue will be getting the Minister's attention in the near future.

CU understands that the Department of Communications and the Arts is already preparing urgent advice for the Minister in an effort to find a not-too-public way out of the problem. □



NERDS DRIVING THE HIGHWAY?

Carmen Lawrence started quite a media 'to do' with her recent suggestion that too many men are controlling the information superhighway.

Launching Telstra's Business Women's awards on International Women's Day, Dr Lawrence said women were 'not going to be satisfied cheering from the sidelines as men construct a superhighway that effectively excludes them.'

A few days later, *Financial Review* columnist David Clark expounded his opinions on women's access to the Net under the camouflaged headline: 'Smart women lead way down superhighway'.

He accused feminist author Dale Spender - whose research had triggered Dr Lawrence's comment - of suggesting that women should stay 'informationally corsetted in their horse and buggies down a pseudo-feminist dead end'. 'Smart women', as he called them, unhindered by the ideology of the 'older feminist gurus' could use their innate 'people skills' to beat the male nerds at their own game.

The backlash continued in the computer section of *The Australian* (21 March, '95) with a letter from a Queensland reader who was furious that women were now laying claim to a technology that men had spent two decades perfecting.

'This has finally occurred to the idiot feminists, and the male-to-female imbalance on the Net has become a "gender equity problem" - another opportunity for women to fight for equality in our patriarchal, male-dominated sexist society. Get serious. How stupid do we look? Dare we say: 'very'? □

