



Spectrum fee king hit

NON-PROFIT volunteer safety of life organisations have scored a king hit against the imposition of new spectrum management fees which were due to come into force from April this year.

On 7 May the Minister for Communications and the Arts, Michael Lee, announced a spectrum licence fee exemption for all organisations providing volunteer, non-profit, emergency services including rural fire fighting, search and rescue, coast guard, surf life saving and remote area ambulance services.

Without the exemptions, the Spectrum Management Agency's new apparatus licence fee arrangements would have seen charges to groups such as Surf Lifesaving Australia go from zero to around \$80,000 annually.

Public concern

In April, just after the new fee system was to have come into place, the Minister granted an exemption to surf rescue clubs. This followed strong public criticism when the story was picked up by Sydney talkback radio. After further representations to the Minister the exemption was extended to include all other volunteer rescue groups.

Ray Gill of the Volunteer Rescue Association of New South Wales (VRA) welcomed the way Minister Lee resolved the issue. 'This financial burden would have just been too difficult for volunteer rescue organisations to bear,' Gill said. 'Communities are willing to help raise funds for equipment but they can't see the sense in them having to pay government charges and won't donate to meet these sorts of expenses. Exemption was the only solution.'

The Spectrum Management Agency appears to have seriously underestimated the perceived value and importance of these services to the community, and it seems that considerable pressure from within the Department of Communications and the Arts, and finally Ministerial intervention, was required to achieve the final result.

Burden of representation

The incident points to a deeper problem of representation and policy formation.

In 1992 when the idea of public or community users of radio spectrum was brought in with the new *Radiocommunications Act* only vague consideration was given to how these spectrum users might participate in the policy process in order to assert their rights of spectrum access. Indeed there seems to be some confusion in the SMA, the Department and even the Minister's office about who public or community service users are.

A group such as the 'Public or Community Spectrum Users Association', or something like it, has not yet emerged to take on the burden of representation created by the policy process. Groups such as the Volunteer Rescue Association and Surf Lifesaving Australia now realise that some streamlining and co-ordination will be necessary to meet this challenge, but this move encompasses only some of the intended beneficiaries of the public or community services concept.

As a result other booby-traps no doubt lie in the path to creating a market in radio frequency spectrum. □

Christina Spurgeon

Creative Budget

THE BUDGET statement of 9 May contained little that we hadn't already heard from Minister Lee's portfolio. Almost \$100 million in budgeted funds had already been announced in last year's *Creative Nation* statement.

The new budget items include:

- ◆ \$3.36 million over the next three years for remote area TV access.
- ◆ \$1.28 million to the Spectrum Management Agency to fast-track a new method of spectrum licensing.

Under the arts and communications portfolio section of *Creative Nation*:

- ◆ \$20 million a year over the next three years to the Television Production Fund.
- ◆ \$3.68 million for the Australia on CD program in 95/96.
- ◆ \$7 million over four years for the New Media Program with \$5.25 m to the Australian Film Commission, \$950,000 to the Australian, Film & TV School, \$700,000 to the Children's TV Foundation and \$100,000 to the DOCA.
- ◆ \$50 million a year until 1998 to the Film Finance Corporation for direct support to the Australian film industry.
- ◆ \$1.2 million for a refocused AusMusic to promote contemporary Australian music.
- ◆ \$11.3 million over four years for refurbishment of Old Parliament House as a constitutional, political and social history museum.
- ◆ \$11.6 million for the National Film and Sound Archive to design and build new facilities.