



COMMUNITY  
BROADCASTING  
ASSOCIATION OF  
AUSTRALIA

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Committee Secretary  
Select Committee on Regional Australia  
PO Box 6021  
Parliament House  
Canberra ACT 2600

## **SUBMISSION TO THE HOUSE SELECT COMMITTEE ON REGIONAL AUSTRALIA'S INQUIRY INTO REGIONAL AUSTRALIA**

The Community Broadcasting Association of Australia (CBAA) welcomes the opportunity to participate in the House Select Committee's Inquiry into Regional Australia.

As the peak body and national representative organisation for over 450 community radio stations across Australia – 76% of which are located in regional and remote communities – we value the opportunity to add our thoughts on:

- The vital contribution of community radio stations to the lives of Australians living in regional, rural and remote parts of the country;
- The operating challenges faced by community radio stations in regional Australia; and
- The policy measures needed to ensure regional community radio stations can operate sustainably and better support regional communities.

In summary, the CBAA recommends that this Inquiry:

- Recognises the important role that community radio plays in regional Australia, particularly during times of drought and hardship.
- Recommends an increase in funding for the community radio sector to ensure stations in regional Australia can continue and enhance their services for local communities.
- Recommends the Commonwealth provide ongoing funding for the roll out of regional digital radio beyond what is included in the Forward Estimates to ensure sector sustainability and viability.

## **About community broadcasting and the CBAA**

Community broadcasting is Australia's largest independent media sector. It makes an important contribution to the diversity, inclusiveness and social cohesion that characterises Australia's open society. It reinforces Australia's cultural vibrancy by:

- Providing a voice to communities not adequately served by other broadcasters, in particular regional, rural and remote communities; Indigenous communities; ethnic and multicultural; educational; community access; religious and faith-based; Radio Reading Network for people with a print disability; youth and seniors; LGBTQIA+; and specialist music and arts communities.



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AUSTRALIAN MUSIC RADIO AIRPLAY PROJECT

- Giving a platform to a diverse range of local viewpoints that enrich our social and cultural fabric and promote media diversity.
- Providing opportunities for social inclusion, local community participation and media access in the public interest.
- Supporting local content production and delivering content tailored to the needs and interest of local communities.

Community radio draws its listeners from a wide cross-section of the Australian community and has more listeners now than ever. Nationwide, **5.9 million listeners tune in to the more than 450 community radio stations each week** – that’s 30% of Australians aged 15 years and older.<sup>1</sup> 76% of these stations are in regional, rural and remote parts of Australia<sup>2</sup>, and 28% of the population or 1.8 million people in non-metro Australia listen each week.<sup>3</sup> Further, community broadcasting is the largest component of Indigenous media production in Australia and with 48% of people who identify as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander listen to community radio during a typical week.

The community radio sector is powered by the efforts and dedication of over 26,000 volunteers.<sup>4</sup> Over half of stations are entirely volunteer run and 17% of volunteers are under 26 years of age.<sup>5</sup> This means that the community radio sector is an important conduit for skills, training and pathways opportunities in regional Australia across a range of topic areas relevant to broadcasting, management and operations.

The CBAA is the peak body for community broadcasting stations in Australia and an internationally recognised, not-for-profit cultural organisation. Since our inception, we have strived to prioritise voices otherwise not heard on air and always prided ourselves on maintaining a diverse sector, supported by volunteers and other community-minded individuals.

The CBAA champions community broadcasting by building stations’ capability and creating a healthy environment for the sector to thrive. We work toward ensuring that community broadcasting is recognised as an excellent, innovative, sustainable, accessible, trusted and diverse industry, and a key pillar in Australian broadcasting that contributes to an open society and cultural vibrancy.

## Contribution of community radio to regional Australia

### Spaces for community participation, community cohesion and overcoming social isolation

As community radio content is made by the people for the people, community radio stations offer unique spaces for community participation, connection and community cohesion. In many regional centres, the local community radio station will have a general geographic licence and serve a number of community needs – from different ethnic and language groups, to arts and culture; youth and seniors; religious; Indigenous; LGBTQIA+; or radio reading services for people with a disability. In particular, regional community radio stations act as catalysts for community dialogue and resilience through tough times, help combat social isolation and, importantly, connect people to the critical services they need.

<sup>1</sup> Community Broadcasting Association of Australia (2019). National Listener Survey Australia Fact Sheet Wave #1 July 2019 [online] Available at: <https://www.cbaa.org.au/sites/default/files/media/NLS%20Fact%20Sheet%20-%20Australia%20-%202019.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> Community Broadcasting Association of Australia (2019). State of the Sector Report [online] Available at: [https://www.cbaa.org.au/sites/default/files/media/CBAA%20State%20of%20the%20Community%20Radio%20Sector%20Report%202019\\_4.pdf](https://www.cbaa.org.au/sites/default/files/media/CBAA%20State%20of%20the%20Community%20Radio%20Sector%20Report%202019_4.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> Community Broadcasting Association of Australia (2019). National Listener Survey Non-Metro Fact Sheet Wave #1 July 2019 [online] Available at: <https://www.cbaa.org.au/sites/default/files/media/NLS%20Fact%20Sheet%20-%20Non-Metro%20-%202019.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> Community Broadcasting Association of Australia (2019). State of the Sector Report [online] Available at: [https://www.cbaa.org.au/sites/default/files/media/CBAA%20State%20of%20the%20Community%20Radio%20Sector%20Report%202019\\_4.pdf](https://www.cbaa.org.au/sites/default/files/media/CBAA%20State%20of%20the%20Community%20Radio%20Sector%20Report%202019_4.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> Ibid

Community radio can help isolated groups or individuals in society feel connected. It can help overcome feelings of loneliness impacting people isolated by circumstance such as being in prison; experiencing a mobility issue or illness; with beliefs, political views or artistic interests outside the mainstream<sup>6</sup>; and importantly, those distanced by geography like in regional and outback Australia.

Community radio stations contribute to social cohesion in unique ways. Wilcannia River Radio in outback NSW provides a voice for the community of Central Darling Shire in north-western NSW, near the Barka (Darling) River. The station is a go-to service for residents, through the sharing of local news and information; engaging community at events; and through local partnerships such as Unity for the Community, Remote School Attendance Strategy (RSAS) and the WINGS Drop-in Centre. The community is currently experiencing a severe water shortage due to drought. As a result, Wilcannia River Radio has taken on the responsibility of providing fresh water to the community by acting as a meeting point for people accessing water, and transporting water to elders and others unable to make the trip.

Community radio stations also help those isolated within their own geographic communities. OCR FM is a general-licensed station in Colac, a town of just over 12,000 people in western Victoria. In the past, there has been a lack of visibility for the LGBTQIA+ community which has contributed to substance abuse, and mental and physical health issues among community members.<sup>7</sup> OCR FM's program *From Paddocks to Pride* works to combat LGBTQIA+ stereotypes and misconceptions, and focuses on hosting discussions that benefit the mental and physical wellbeing of the community.

### **Vital providers of local information, local news and local stories**

Community radio stations in regional, rural and remote parts of the country are by their very nature, hyperlocal conduits for information and news. In our most recent Community Radio National Listener Survey, 64% of respondents in non-metro regions said that their top reason for listening to community radio was for 'local information and local news.'<sup>8</sup> In many regional areas financial pressures faced by commercial news outlets has seen the closure of local newspapers and newsrooms. The community broadcasting sector has a long history of delivering local news and public interest journalism to diverse communities across Australia, and is well-placed to continue providing and enhancing this offering.

Such changes in the media landscape often mean that community broadcasters are now the only broadcasters of local public interest content in rural and regional areas. For example, in Bourke in NSW, 2WEB are now also publishing *The Western Herald*, saving that iconic paper from closing. This means the station is sharing local news and journalism both on air and via the paper.

The sector is not only well-positioned to provide public interest journalism in regional and rural communities, but also in a community-appropriate way, as stations are apt at serving diverse community need. For example, Ngaarda Media is the only First Nations media outlet in the Pilbara in Western Australia, and delivers news and journalism via radio and online about local issues. The station was recently successful in securing funding from the Judith Nielson Institute to support a roving reporter to further the number of news bulletins produced.

### **Contributing to national identity**

Local people broadcasting local stories reflects local identities, fostering a sense of self-representation and recognition. Sharing such content via national platforms means regional broadcasters contribute to Australia's national dialogue and national identity, as their stories are heard by people nationwide. Each week, the CBAA's Community Radio Network (CRN) distributes

<sup>6</sup> Dr Simon Order (2018), Community Radio: The Joy of Social Connection, [online] Available at:

<https://cbf.org.au/documents/2018/08/joy-social-connection.pdf/>

<sup>7</sup> <https://cbf.org.au/from-paddocks-to-pride/>

<sup>8</sup> Community Broadcasting Association of Australia (2019). National Listener Survey Non-Metro Fact Sheet Wave #1 July 2019 [online] Available at: <https://www.cbaa.org.au/sites/default/files/media/NLS%20Fact%20Sheet%20-%20Non-Metro%20-%202019.pdf>

and showcases over 116 regular, specialist-talk and music programs, 16 of which are made in regional areas. The CRN has approximately 138 subscribing stations, and 2,134,000 potential listeners each week. Regionally-made programs cover diverse topics including current affairs; pregnancy, birth and parenthood; LGBTQIA+ issues; health and wellbeing; and diverse arts and music.

National flagship programs broadcast on CRN, such as current affairs program *The Wire* or Australian storytelling program *All the Best* also share regional stories nationwide. For example, Mia Armitage from Bay FM in Byron Bay (NSW) has this year produced diverse stories for *The Wire* and *All The Best* partners with SPUN stories (SPUN: True Stories Told in the Territory) based in Darwin to feature a story from one of their live storytelling events every six weeks.

CRN also broadcasts the sector's *National Radio News* – 84 bulletins created and distributed from regional university Charles Sturt in Bathurst (NSW). National stories are voiced and crafted by regional Bathurst journalism students. *National Radio News* has recently been revised to ensure that more First Nations, culturally diverse and regional-focused content is included in each bulletin.

### Supporting music and arts in regional Australia

In regional Australia, community radio's role in the development of music and arts and their communities is particularly important. Across Australia, no less than 37% of music broadcast on community radio is from Australian artists, well surpassing the Community Radio Broadcasting Codes of Practice requirement of 25%.<sup>9</sup>

On average, 140 hours of music programming goes to air each week on a regional or rural/remote station. This includes 60 hours of Australian music programming, more than metropolitan and suburban community radio stations. Furthermore, a rural/remote station records on average per year 132 hours of music performance by Australian musicians. More than half of all music performance recorded for broadcast in 2016/17 was done so by regional, rural and remote stations – 25,000 hours.<sup>10</sup>

In regional Australia, community radio helps promote music and arts development by:

- Encouraging community and commercial radio in urban and regional areas to support Australian artists.
- Developing initiatives that foster a viable touring network in regional and remote Australia, for both local and international artists.
- Supporting regional councils in the development of council-specific music plans to stimulate local music economies.
- Assisting in development of online resources and support services to better encourage regional artists and communities.

For example:

- Taree (NSW)'s 2BOB FM is a founding supporter of the Manning Valley region's annual Akoostik music festival.
- Blue Mountains Radio (NSW) hosts regular 'Vocal Locals – A Celebration of Blue Mountains Music' live music events.
- 8CCC who broadcasts to both Alice Spring and Tennant Creek (NT), is famous for its cafe in the front of the studio where locals will find live performances, training workshops, and people listening to new music that has just arrived.
- WA's Radio MAMA (Geraldton, Carnarvon, Mullewa, Mt Magnet) broadcasts live from Tamworth Country Music Festival each year, covering the festival from an Indigenous perspective, as well as from the Boyup Brook Country Music Festival.
- MAIN FM in Castlemaine (VIC) is well known in its local community for presenting local music gigs, music trivia nights and local DJ nights.

<sup>9</sup> Community Broadcasting Association of Australia (2018). CBAA Programming & Technology Survey

<sup>10</sup> Community Broadcasting Association of Australia (2018). CBAA Programming & Technology Survey.

## Emergency broadcasts

Community radio stations also play an important role in regional areas in times of emergencies, for examples fires, floods and severe storms. For example in Victoria, official emergency broadcasters (alongside ABC Local Radio and commercial stations) include regional community stations Radio KLFM (Bendigo), UGFM – Radio Murrindindi (Murrindindi Shire), Radio Mansfield (Mansfield), Alpine Radio (Mount Beauty), 3MGB (far east Gippsland) and Gippsland FM (Latrobe Valley).<sup>11</sup>

### Recommendation 1

The Committee recognises the important role that community radio plays in regional Australia, particularly during times of drought and hardship.

## The operating challenges faced by community radio stations in regional Australia

Community radio stations are able to achieve their significantly low-cost/high-output radio production and community successes, with strict regulations limiting their commercial fundraising capacity.<sup>12</sup> This is because of the time and dedication of 26,000 volunteers supporting 766 FTE staff, and the support and goodwill of their communities.

While as a whole the sector is strong and growing, many community radio stations in regional Australia are facing challenging times. The east coast drought is impacting regional stations' ability to generate income and retain volunteers; changes to NDIS funding has created a funding vacuum for Radio Reading Services serving print disabled communities in regional areas; and the growth of digital media is disrupting traditional media operating models.

Communities across Australia are also changing how they listen to radio and consume content. Community radio stations, like others in the broadcast industry, are finding that they need to adapt to community need and transition to multiplatform delivery by providing their service/s via digital infrastructure including websites, online streaming, apps and smart speakers. Digital infrastructure is costly to operate – extra to what it costs to run primary, terrestrial broadcasts and licensees need support to generate the extra income to match these rising costs.

During this period of disruption, is also great opportunity. Community broadcasters are vital conduits for local information and local news – and can play a greater role in reporting in Australia's underserved regions as commercial media pulls out. The CBAA sees an opportunity here – and, through its Enhanced National News Project, supported by the Community Broadcasting Foundation, is working with the community broadcasting sector to ensure a greater delivery of more local news, reporting and public interest journalism in the regions.

## Better support for community radio in regional Australia

Community radio stations are largely self-funded through sponsorship, fundraising and membership contributions. Funding for the Community Broadcasting Program through the Department of Communications and Arts and distributed by the Community Broadcasting Foundation (CBF) is around 7.5% of station income on average, although this varies widely.<sup>13</sup> There is great diversity in community radio licensees, and some sections of the community broadcasting sector which are

<sup>11</sup> Emergency Management Victoria, Official Emergency Broadcasters in Victoria, [www.emv.vic.gov.au/responsibilitiesvictorias-warning-systememergency-broadcasters/official-emergency-broadcasters-in](http://www.emv.vic.gov.au/responsibilitiesvictorias-warning-systememergency-broadcasters/official-emergency-broadcasters-in)

<sup>12</sup> The Broadcasting Services Act (1992) places limits on the amount of advertising, in the form of sponsorship, that community broadcasters are permitted to put on air.

<sup>13</sup> Community Broadcasting Association of Australia (2017), Community Broadcasting Sector Financial Health of Community Radio Survey (FY 2015-16). Available at: [www.cbba.org.au/sites/default/files/media/CBAA%202017%20Financial%20Health%20of%20Community%20Radio%20Survey%20FINAL.pdf](http://www.cbba.org.au/sites/default/files/media/CBAA%202017%20Financial%20Health%20of%20Community%20Radio%20Survey%20FINAL.pdf)

more heavily reliant on government income. This reflects the greater difficulty some stations face in raising commercial income due to their remote locations, community size or targeted listenership.

As noted in the ACCC's Digital Platforms Inquiry final report, the digital environment has disrupted media organisations' traditional operating models. In 2016-17 the community radio sector saw a 7% decrease in total sector income from \$103,533,154 to \$96,122,119, with a 9% decrease in regional areas.<sup>14</sup> Although restricted by a 5 minute per hour sponsorship limit, the biggest income generator for stations is sponsorship. In the same year, sponsorship income dropped to 40% from 44% of total income (2015-16). Feedback to the CBAA from stations in drought-affected areas suggests that sponsorship is increasingly hard to secure because local sponsors are more often than not, businesses directly related to farming and agricultural industries. As expected, expenditure for the regional stations was down overall by 11%.

The pressure on stations' operating models has resulted in a noted increase in applications to the Community Broadcasting Foundation (CBF) for general development and operations funding. Despite pressure on traditional operating models and the demands this has placed on the CBF, the CBF's Development and Operations Grants via the General Sustainability and Development (GSD) fund has not received an increase in Government funding since 2011.<sup>15</sup> Due to its need to manage limited funds, the CBF has been unable to meet the increased demand for general development and operational funding.

In 2018-19, the CBF received 305 funding applications from community radio organisations for general development and operational costs – a total request of just over \$14.5 million. Of that, there was unmet demand across the sector of \$7,586,862 – or about half of what was requested.

A certain portion of the funding available to stations for Development and Operations Grants is set aside to support specific communities, which includes ethnic and multicultural broadcasters, Indigenous broadcasters and Radio Reading Services for people with a print disability. There is no specific funding pool for regional broadcasters. An increase to the general funding pool available through the Community Broadcasting General Sustainability and Development (GSD) fund would best support regional stations without reducing funding earmarked for other vital purposes.

### **Recommendation 2**

Increase funding for community radio stations to ensure stations in regional Australia can continue and enhance the support they provide to their local communities.

### **Long-term funding certainty**

In addition to services in the cities of Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane, Adelaide and Perth, new digital radio services are being rolled out in Canberra, Darwin and Hobart. In 2017, the former Minister for Communications confirmed the Government's facilitation of the roll-out of digital radio to regional Australia.

Given the demonstrable importance of community broadcasting in regional Australia and its pivotal role in supporting local news, information and local communities, it is crucial that the Government provides the sector with ongoing funding certainty. The current arrangement of having the sector rely on yearly budget decisions for significant funding is unsustainable in the long-term. Currently, a portion of funding designated for community digital radio roll out, is not included in the Forward Estimates from 2021/22 and ongoing, and as such, is also not indexed.

<sup>14</sup> Community Broadcasting Association of Australia (2019), Community Broadcasting Sector Financial Health of Community Radio Survey (2016-17).

<sup>15</sup> In 2011 the CBF was awarded \$3 million as the Content Development Fund, which has since been streamlined as a result of the CBF Structure & Governance Review, including approximately \$1,564,000 amalgamated into the General Sustainability & Development fund.

We note that in its Report released on 5 February 2018, the Select Committee on the Future of Public Interest Journalism recommended that “the Commonwealth provide additional surety in future funding for the community broadcasting sector beyond the forward estimates, in particular what component will be set aside for training and education, and ensure that the sector is fully consulted in the national rollout of digital services.” (Recommendation 2.)

In its response, the Coalition Government noted this recommendation and stated its support and recognition of the valuable service community broadcasting brings to groups in the community that are not specifically served by commercial, subscription or national broadcasters, and its contribution to the diversity of the media landscape.

**Recommendation 3**

Ensure ongoing funding for the roll out of regional community digital radio beyond what is included in the Forward Estimates to ensure sector sustainability and viability.

Community radio stations are well-placed to continue and enhance their standings in regional, rural and remote communities. By ensuring that key broadcast infrastructure and operational needs are provided for, community radio stations can focus on their activities that improve the health and wellbeing of their communities, and work to increase the delivery of local news and reporting.

The CBAA is committed to working closely with the Select Committee to further share our ideas, experience and knowledge on leveraging community radio’s expertise in building and supporting regional communities. As the peak body for the sector, and an active participant in research, policy and planning in broadcasting reform, the CBAA is well placed to provide further advice.

Kind regards,



Jon Bisset  
Chief Executive Officer