

**Australian Government
Department of Communications and the Arts
Review of the Viewer Access Satellite Television
(VAST) service**

**Submission by the
Northern Territory Government**

June 2018

The Northern Territory Government's submission to the Australian Government's review of the Viewer Access Satellite Television service primarily addresses questions 1, 6 and 9 in the issues paper published by the Department of Communications and the Arts.

The VAST service in the Northern Territory provides an indispensable service to some of the most remote areas of Australia. It has become increasingly valuable in maintaining contact with the outside world for people living and working in these areas.

Following the Australian Broadcasting Corporation ceasing its shortwave radio service in the NT in January 2017, VAST is now the only remaining free means, and for almost half of the population in remote NT areas, the only means of receiving information from the outside world. This unilateral decision by the national broadcaster was received with dismay and concern by individuals and businesses throughout remote NT, as well as the NT Government.

When announcing its decision, the ABC advised that ABC Radio would continue to be broadcast on FM and AM bands and be streamed online via the ABC mobile phone application and the VAST service. The ABC also announced transitional measures, including donation of VAST satellite system units to all Royal Flying Doctor Service (RFDS) bases and 4WD Radio Club bases in the affected region. The ABC stated that this would allow the rebroadcast of emergency and warning messages that are no longer available over radio.

The ABC's Managing Director, Ms Michelle Guthrie, advised in the Senate on 28 February 2017, that the VAST service provides an alternative to shortwave radio in the Northern Territory for accessing essential communications.

This highlights a view that VAST provides an important community service in remote areas and that the VAST service will continue to provide an essential service to remote Territorians who were disadvantaged by the decision to cease shortwave radio.

At least 23,000 residents can only access ABC services through VAST¹. There is no alternative radio service and terrestrial television is confined to the few main population centres. Online internet access is only available for people in these areas via the technically inferior National Broadband Network (NBN) Sky Muster satellite service and is further restrained by NBN Co's Fair Use Policy limiting the data download ability of users.

The uptake of the NBN satellite service in remote Aboriginal communities where there is no mobile phone or fixed line broadband is low at under 20% of eligible connections and cost is a major constraint. Where it does exist, intervention by government or non-government organisations is usually needed to establish a WiFi mesh in the community from the satellite connection. Individual residences are reluctant to connect directly owing to the requirement to commit to post-paid services. Where mobile telephony is available in remote communities the overwhelming choice is pre-paid services which allow people to manage the costs.

For remote residents and travellers who have no mobile phone access, the VAST service is their connection to the rest of the world. Residents rely on VAST to receive critical safety information in emergency situations as do tourists. Travellers in Campervans and RUV/ SUV rely on the system for weather update and emergency coverage, particularly when mobile and broadband coverage is not available.

The VAST service plays a vital role in the education and well-being of many thousands of very remote and disadvantaged residents of the NT. It enables people who work and reside in some of the most remote areas of Australia on pastoral properties, tourist destinations and Aboriginal communities, to maintain contact with mainstream issues in the rest of the country.

It is essential that the VAST service is maintained, especially after the shutdown of the ABC's shortwave radio service in the NT ceased the only radio communications available to many remote Territorians and took away the main channel for emergency broadcasts. So many people in the NT have no access to a mobile phone or fixed broadband service meaning that some of the modern

¹ Department of Corporate and Information Services Answer to Questions on Notice - Senate Environment and Communications Legislation Committee hearing Darwin Thursday March 9 2017 - Australian Broadcasting Corporation Amendment (Restoring Shortwave Radio) Bill 2017

television alternatives (such as streaming services like Netflix) are not available or are unwatchable over a satellite service (where this is connected).

The issue of losing the ABC shortwave service in 2017 will be significantly exacerbated if VAST were to be ended or restricted in any way for thousands of remote Territorians.

To summarise, in relation to the key questions posed:

- Q1 - the VAST service is the primary and, in many cases, only means to access television in remote NT. Removing or degrading VAST would see residents and travellers significantly impacted and further disadvantaged.
- Q6 - online TV content is making minimal change to remote NT viewers due to access and affordability constraints. Remote Territorians will not be able to switch over to other channels and content providers if VAST is removed.
- Q9 - the primary reason to maintain VAST beyond 2020 is because it is the only communications channel and contact with the rest of the world for thousands of Territorians. Taking away the VAST service would set back people who are already severely disadvantaged by many decades. Such action would take the Northern Territory and the nation backwards not forwards. Landline phone services in remote areas are deteriorating rapidly and becoming unreliable, the main radio service was disconnected in 2017; mobile phone services have limited coverage and satellite services are restricted, cost-prohibitive and lower quality. Removing free to-air television, as the one remaining communications service, would be irresponsible and manifestly unfair.

Digital connectivity is now considered essential and is taken for granted by most Australians. The VAST service must be retained to preserve the limited communications connectivity that is available to remote Territorians.