



**MEDIA RELEASE: Monday, August 24, 2020**

## **Regional media support needs accountability**

MEAA has called for greater oversight of the Federal Government's regional media support fund as redundancies continue in companies that have received the taxpayer support.

Australia's media union has also called for ongoing commitment from the government, in line with recommendations from the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission.

Last week Southern Cross Austereo, a recipient of \$10 million under the government's \$50 million regional media support package, announced 38 jobs would be lost due to a restructure of its radio operations. The company blamed the challenges of the COVID-19 environment.

Australian Community Media, which owns more than 170 regional media mastheads, has shut or closed multiple titles with the loss of an undetermined number of jobs. It too is a recipient of government support.

MEAA Media's federal president Marcus Strom said: "How is it that big media companies can access millions of dollars in government funding while making staff redundant? It seems that the Government package is supporting shareholders and boardrooms rather than the working journalists who deliver news and information to the communities they serve. The Government needs to reset its priorities to better serve audiences and the taxpayer.

"While any support is welcome the government support to date is inadequate, misdirected and time-limited. There is no doubt that all regional media businesses are doing it tough but smaller media outlets are closing down and others may never recover."

The government's Public Interest News Gathering initiative (PING), much of its money repurposed from other projects, is targeting only larger regional media businesses with a history of providing public interest journalism and that have been in operation for more than a year. The support is only available for 12 months.

Support is denied to regional media start-ups – the very outlets that are struggling to maintain an essential service to their community.

"The loss of small media outlets is dire. The provision of news and information is an essential service during the pandemic. More must be done to provide an ongoing lifeline to keep local media operating," Strom said.

MEAA's Our Communities, Our Stories public campaign has highlighted the urgency of the crisis. MEAA has called on regional community leaders and councils, as well as local and federal MPs to fight for greater funding.

"Regional media outlets are the lifeblood of local communities. They ensure voices are heard, vital news and information is shared; community events are promoted and celebrated. They scrutinise politicians and the powerful, and they play an essential role in our democracy," Strom said.

MEAA Media acting director Adam Portelli said: "Big city-based media companies need to put the interests of the communities they purport to represent front and centre. Closing their smaller mastheads and consolidating them in a regional hub or centralising news from a capital city does not fill the gap when local news outlets are shut down."

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MEAA has called on new initiatives for regional media including tax incentives and funding support for start-ups; greater transparency and accountability for how government support is distributed and spent; and government advertising to be directed to local media.

Strom said: “The need for greater support is now. Jobs are being lost, businesses are closing down, communities are losing their voice. Misdirected funding, poorly targeted support and a lack of accountability for how funds are spent will do irrevocable damage unless urgent action is taken to save regional media.”

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