



# Television Black Spots Alternative Technical Solutions Program

*An Australian Government initiative*

# Guidelines

Revised  
26 March 2003

# Television Black Spots—Alternative Technical Solutions Program

## BACKGROUND

The Television Black Spots Program is a component of the Australian Government's \$120 million Television Fund initiative, funded from the proceeds of the partial sale of Telstra. The aim of the program was to assist communities to fix 200 to 250 major television 'black spot' areas throughout Australia.

The Television Black Spots Program (TVBSP) was launched in June 2000. Round one of the program closed on 6 October 2000 and round two closed on 30 March 2001. A total of 413 expressions of interest for new services and 201 applications to replace obsolete equipment at existing self-help retransmission facilities were received under rounds one and two of the Program.

*'The Government's \$13.3 million Television Black Spots—Alternative Technical Solutions program has been developed to further improve television reception in regional areas.'*

The concept of the TVBSP arose in response to concerns about inadequate television reception in both regional and rural locations. The selection of analog retransmission solutions to fix black spot problems followed a consultative process involving the Department of Communications, Information Technology and the Arts (the Department), the Australian Broadcasting Authority (ABA) and the broadcasting industry. This process considered various options for delivery of improved reception, including direct-to-home satellite, terrestrial retransmission using analog or digital signals, microwave distribution and cable reticulation.

The Scoping Study—the principle output of the consultative process—recommended the use of the analog retransmission approach. Analog retransmission was seen to best meet the objectives of providing access to local services, maximising access to the greatest number of services, minimising cost to consumers, consistency with existing communications policies, community-based rather than individual assistance and most cost effective funds expenditure.

The Government's \$13.3 million Television Black Spots—Alternative Technical Solutions (TVBS—ATS) program has been developed to further improve television reception in regional areas. Building on the TVBSP, which supports improved television reception through analog retransmission, this funding will support the development of alternative technical solutions to assist eligible applicants who could not be assisted under the TVBSP. This is either because frequencies are unavailable or an analog retransmission solution is not viable because an analog retransmission facility cannot cover at least 80 per cent of the households in the black spot area.

The TVBS—ATS program will be administered by the Department.

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## PROGRAM ELIGIBILITY

*‘The program eligibility rules that applied to the TVBSP will also be applied to ATS projects. In particular, Coordinating Bodies will need to confirm their commitment to meeting any ongoing operation and maintenance of retransmission equipment and associated costs.’*

Eligibility is restricted to Coordinating Bodies that have submitted an Expression of Interest (EOI) under rounds one or two of the TVBSP, but could not be assisted because frequencies are unavailable or an analog retransmission solution is not viable because an analog retransmission facility cannot cover at least 80 per cent of the households in the black spot area.

Assistance is restricted to the specific black spot locations nominated in the EOIs. It will not be necessary for Coordinating Bodies to re-apply for funding under this program, as their original EOI will be treated as their application under this program. The Coordinating Body will continue to be responsible for the submission and be the contact point for the Department.

The program eligibility rules that applied to the TVBSP will also be applied to ATS projects. In particular, Coordinating Bodies will need to confirm their commitment to meeting any ongoing operation and maintenance of retransmission equipment and associated costs.

Under the TVBSP, it was necessary for Coordinating Bodies to provide evidence of the number of households affected by poor television reception in the black spot area identified in the EOI. However, as it was only necessary to provide evidence that in excess of 100 or 50 households were affected by the problem to be eligible for funding, it is recognised that in some instances the number of households nominated in the EOI may not be accurate.

As funding for individual solutions may be offered under this program, Coordinating Bodies will be afforded the opportunity to resubmit evidence regarding the number of households which have poor reception in the black spot area identified in the EOI. Consistent with the TVBSP, nominated households are to be permanently occupied residential dwellings.

Candidates for TVBS—ATS have been identified through the TVBSP’s rigorous planning and assessment process. This process identified areas where spectrum was unavailable or where an analog retransmission solution was not viable because it would not provide coverage to 80 per cent of the households in the black spot area. The Department will be formally advising Coordinating Bodies that have become candidates under TVBS—ATS program.

## POSSIBLE ALTERNATIVE TECHNICAL SOLUTIONS

The following options have been identified as possible alternative technical solutions for locations that could not be provided services using the analog retransmission model of the TVBSP project:

- digital retransmission facilities;
- direct-to-home satellite reception equipment for individual homes; or
- cabling (in the event other solutions are not viable).

## Digital Retransmission Facilities

*‘The coverage characteristics of an analog and digital signal are quite different, and it is possible that an analog television black spot may fare better with a digital signal.’*

At the time of the development of the TVBSP, only analog signals were being transmitted. However, more recently, digital television has commenced transmission in all capital cities and is progressively being rolled out to regional areas. The coverage characteristics of an analog and digital signal are quite different, and it is possible that an analog television black spot may fare better with a digital signal. The Department will be engaging a panel of expert broadcast engineers to conduct testing in the nominated analog black spot areas to determine the extent to which the area is also a digital black spot. Further, the contractor will also assess whether a digital solution is required, and if so, provide initial data to assist with the process of identifying a suitable solution.

The timing of this digital signal testing will be dependent upon broadcasters commencing digital transmission in the nominated black spot area. However, it is anticipated that the testing will be completed by December 2003.

In the event that the digital signal provides good coverage of the nominated area, the Coordinating Body will be advised and information will be made available about accessing the digital service. Should there still be signal deficiencies in the area, the survey results will be used as a starting point for considering digital retransmission options.

As digital technology continues to evolve, a range of possible solutions are coming to light and will be explored in terms of applicability and viability. One solution may not suit all circumstances and individually tailored solutions will be considered. Trials of promising technology may be conducted in black spot areas to assist with this process.

Digital solutions are not expected to be offered until the latter half of 2003.

## Direct-to-home

*‘Funding will be offered on the basis of \$1200 per household and the Coordinating Body will be responsible for sourcing the satellite equipment and making it available to nominated residents.’*

### **Remote licence areas**

For black spots in a remote licence area, direct-to-home (DTH) satellite equipment is the only solution available. Coordinating Bodies will be given the opportunity to update household numbers within the black spot area nominated in the EOI submitted under the TVBSP. Funding will be offered on the basis of \$1200 per household and the Coordinating Body will be responsible for sourcing the satellite equipment and making it available to nominated residents.

A reimbursement up to the funding cap amount will be available to individuals in the black spot area who have purchased DTH equipment since the EOI was submitted and can provide proof of purchase. This reimbursement will be part of the funding made available to the Coordinating Body.

### **Regional licence areas**

DTH may also be offered as a solution in regional licence areas. This solution will not provide residents with local content, but it does provide access to the ABC and SBS. Imparja and Seven Central are also available, but this is subject to approval from the ABA to allow access to these out-of-area services. It may be necessary to reassess the picture quality of the households in the black spot area as the requirements for individual access to out of area services differs from the requirements of picture quality identified under the TVBSP, which provided a single community-wide solution. A representative sample of 10% of the households in the black spot area may need to be reassessed. An amount of up to \$2000 will be made available to the Co-ordinating Body to assist with the costs incurred of engaging a suitably qualified technician to undertake the further survey work required. The Department will provide assistance and guidance with this process.

Coordinating Bodies will be given the opportunity to update household numbers within the black spot area nominated in the EOI submitted under the TVBSP. Funding will be offered on the basis of \$1200 per household and the Coordinating Body will be responsible for sourcing the satellite equipment and making it available to nominated residents. A reimbursement, up to the funding cap amount, will be available to individuals in the black spot area who have purchased DTH equipment since the EOI was submitted and can provide proof of purchase. This reimbursement will be part of the funding made available to the Coordinating Body.

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## FUNDING CAPS FOR SOLUTIONS

*‘Funding of up to \$300 000 per black spot will be available.’*

Under the program, funding of up to \$300 000 per black spot will be available to assist with the cost of purchasing and installing equipment that will enable the reception of television in the nominated black spot areas. Funding will not be available to meet any ongoing costs that may be incurred.

Where direct to home equipment is offered as the solution, \$1200 per household will be available but collectively the community is not to exceed the \$300 000 limit per black spot. For example:

- for a black spot with 100 households, funding of \$120 000 will be offered; or
- for a black spot of 300 households, a maximum of \$300 000 will be offered—reducing the subsidy to \$1000 per household.

Up to \$2 000 of the \$300 000 limit per black spot may be used to cover the costs of conducting any further technical survey work required for a DTH solution. Irrespective of the survey results, the Coordinating Body will be reimbursed for these costs, up to an amount of \$2 000.

## PROCESS FOR SELECTING A SOLUTION

A Steering Committee, comprising representatives from the Department and the ABA, will consider which solution is considered appropriate for each black spot. This Committee may draw on external technical expertise to assist their deliberations. The Steering Committee will also draw on information about the black spots which has become available through the planning and assessment process conducted under the TBSP and the digital signal testing.

The following criteria will also be considered when recommending an alternative technical solution for each black spot:

- Where practicable, digital solutions should be provided.
- Where practicable, communities should receive access to the local television services licensed to operate in their area.
  - *Digital will be able to retransmit local services where adequate signals can be received from local broadcasters, DTH will only provide remote area broadcasting services.*

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- Subject to the preceding principle, technical solutions for individual black spots should be the most cost-effective for that black spot area while maximising coverage for the largest number of households.
  - *Digital rebroadcasting will be most cost-effective for a large number of households, while DTH will be more cost-effective for a smaller number of households.*
  - *Under the TVBSP, funding was offered where a solution would cover at least 80 per cent of the households in the nominated black spot area. This will also apply under this program.*
- Only one solution will be offered per black spot area.
- Funding will only be offered for initial costs (such as equipment, installation and site establishment costs), funding will not be available for ongoing costs.

In some circumstances, the Steering Committee may recommend a solution which will require involvement from the broadcasters because of the complex nature of the solution. Similarly, it may not be possible for the Coordinating Body to implement a proposed solution because of licensing issues associated with retransmitting digital signals. In these instances the Steering Committee will consult with the broadcasters licensed to provide the television services in the black spot area, seeking their assistance in providing the solution.

The Coordinating Body will be advised of the Steering Committee's recommendation of the proposed solution to fix the television black spot area and based on this recommendation the Coordinating Body, after consultation with the Department, will decide whether they or a nominated broadcaster will implement the solution.

Depending on the Coordinating Body's decision as to who will implement the solution, either the Coordinating Body or nominated Broadcaster will be invited to submit a formal application for funding.

## Administrative Processes

*‘Expressions of interest submitted under the TVBSP will be treated as one for the TVBS-ATS Program.’*

Expressions of interest submitted under the TVBSP will be treated as one for the TVBS—ATS program. Assistance will only be provided in relation to households within the nominated black spot area, but Coordinating Bodies will be provided with the opportunity to amend the number of households nominated in the original EOI.

The Coordinating Body will be advised of the Steering Committee’s recommendation of the proposed solution to fix the television black spot area. Applications for funding may be sought from either the Coordinating Body or a nominated broadcaster, depending on the solution deemed appropriate for the black spot location. A comprehensive budget for the purchase and installation of equipment will be sought at this time.

Where the introduction of digital signals has provided access to television services in the nominated analog black spot area, the Department will notify Coordinating Bodies in writing. Information will be provided at this time about accessing these services.

Successful applicants will be required to enter into a funding deed with the Australian Government. This will include:

- signing a funding deed with the Australian Government that sets out the conditions for the provision of financial assistance;
- providing suitable acknowledgment of the role of the Australian Government in providing the funding; and
- acquitting the project in the prescribed manner.

Funds will be provided in two equal amounts. The first instalment will be paid within 30 days of signing of the funding deed, and the second instalment within days of the Department’s acceptance of evidence showing the commencement of reception of the television services.

## Contact details

For further information about this program phone 1800 680 841 (free from a fixed phone), or visit the Department’s website at [www.dcita.gov.au](http://www.dcita.gov.au) under Broadcasting and Online Regulation.