

Melbourne gets ARU's Super 15 nod

Melbourne has won endorsement from the ARU Board as Australia's sole contender for the 15th Super Rugby licence.

The hugely-popular provincial competition will expand by one team in 2011 with the SANZAR joint venture to decide later this year on where the new side will be established.

While the 15th team will play in the Australian Conference as part of a revamped and extended Super Rugby format, interested parties in South Africa and New Zealand are also bidding to have the side based within their national boundaries.

"It was for this reason that the ARU Board accepted a recommendation from Management to put forward only one bid to the next stage of the selection process," said ARU Managing Director and CEO John O'Neill.

"The decision to be made by SANZAR before the end of the year is not where in Australia the team will be based – but in which country.

"Therefore, it will be in the ARU's best interests to proceed with what we consider to be our best and most compelling option."

There were seven Expressions of Interest initially lodged with the ARU – three from Melbourne, and one each from Western Sydney, the Gold Coast, the Sunshine Coast and NSW Country.

NSW Country withdrew from the race last week as ARU senior management travelled to each of the regions to discuss their ability to meet the SANZAR criteria for Super Rugby participation.

In finally settling on Melbourne, the ARU has also called on the three parties from Victoria who put forward separate Expressions of Interest to join forces to ensure Australia's prospects of securing the 15th Super Rugby licence are maximized.

"We want to make sure the 15th team is in Australia; thus the ARU will facilitate the potential for a seamless and sensible amalgamation of those interested parties. It will surely put us in the best position possible," Mr O'Neill said.

"There are elements in each of the Melbourne EOI's that ensure the sum of

the parts will be extremely powerful. They offered a variety of advantages – from the proven ability to operate and finance a professional sporting franchise to delivering on crucial Community Rugby activities. We intend to align these components in a sensible format of ownership.

“At this stage in the evolution of Super Rugby, we believe Melbourne has the best chance of success.

“We are in a three-nation race for the licence and we want the 15th team in Australia. So we need to focus our energy on what will be our most compelling bid.

“However, that is not to say we are turning our backs on other areas that we consider extremely important to our strategic plans and future development.”

SANZAR has indicated the expansion of Super Rugby will not necessarily end with the move to 15 teams in 2011.

A new competition format – where five teams will play in an Australian Conference, five in a South African Conference and five in a New Zealand Conference – will offer the option of increasing those numbers to six or more per Conference at a later stage.

Other expansion options would also be available if teams outside the SANZAR nations were to be included in the competition.

“We believe Western Sydney, Gold Coast and the Sunshine Coast all have great prospects for the future,” said Mr O’Neill.

“At this stage, though, Sunshine Coast does not have a stadium.

“Gold Coast and Western Sydney certainly had strong applications and we are absolutely determined to grow the game in the western suburbs of Sydney where the junior numbers are strong and the population continues to increase.

“This is not the end of the aspirations those regions have to be part of Super Rugby.

“It’s simply a matter of looking at where the game is now, how far the respective parties have gone down the path of preparing themselves for potential entry to the Super Rugby competition, and making a decision on the best contender.

“ARU Management took to the ARU Board a recommendation that Melbourne

was our best chance of securing a fifth Australian team.

“The Board, after significant thought and discussion, gave a unanimous endorsement to that recommendation.”

ARU will now pass on its endorsement of Melbourne to SANZAR, with the joint venture to decide shortly about how many interested parties will be asked to make formal bids for the right to establish the 15th team.

A final decision from SANZAR on the successful bidder is expected in late October.

The winning bid will field a fifth team in the Australian Conference alongside the NSW Waratahs, Brumbies, Western Force and Queensland Reds.

Under the Conference system that will be introduced along with the additional team, each side will play the other four in its Conference on a home and away basis for a total of eight “local derbies”.

Each team will also play four of the five sides in the other two Conferences – on a home or away basis – for a further eight matches.

If the 15th team is based in Australia, the number of regular season games in Australia will increase from 26 to 40 – an increase of 54%.

The total number of matches in the competition will increase from 91 to 120 – an increase of 32%.

The playoffs will also expand to include six teams rather than four. The finals will last three weeks as opposed to two. There will be five games instead of three.

The length of the competition will also increase from 16 weeks presently to 21 weeks in 2011.