Senate Legal and Constitutional Affairs References Committee

Inquiry into the use of smoke alarms

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Submission from: Michael Sobb

On a previous occasion, I contacted the NSW Fire Board concerning the effectiveness of the sound emitted by the current smoke alarms used for domestic premises.

The issue concerns the pitch of the sound. Like many older people, my hearing has deteriorated both with respect to audible level and higher frequencies.

My experiences with the alarms include being in a room with the door open and the activated smoke alarm being in the adjacent hall. It was my wife who then entered and asked "Can't you hear that". It was only when I moved to within a metre of the alarm that I was able to hear a faint whining sound.

Having spent thousands of dollars on different hearing aids, I find they increase the volume but fail to improve the range of frequencies and the clarity of the sound.

The Fire Board response acknowledged that this was a known issue and the only alternative was a special alarm which one placed under the pillow in bed. When it was activated, it would vibrate and turn on a strobe light to alert the person. At the time (some years ago now) the cost was of the order of $500 each alarm.

Over the years, I have experimented with electronics as a hobby and am aware of the variety of sirens which can be constructed with continually alternating sound output from standard components. Would it not be possible to develop a smoke alarm which emits alternating sounds as well as the current high pitch squeal? It is also possible to have a system which initially emits a low tone but it progressively increases the pitch so there is the likelihood that it would be heard at some point by most people since it can be made to repeat this pattern over and over again.

The NSW Police Force and other emergency services have an option to press the vehicle's horn when their siren is in use. This then changes the sound which is generally activated when approaching intersections to enable motorists to hear and locate the source more readily. This alternative sound is often referred to as "Hee Haw".

Thank you for this opportunity to raise this problem.