
Environment and Communications References Committee

Inquiry into Emergency Communications

AFP Submission

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1. Introduction

The Australian Federal Police (AFP) welcomes the opportunity to provide the Senate Committee on Environment and Communications with information relevant to the inquiry into the capacity of communication networks and emergency warning systems to deal with emergencies and natural disasters.

The AFP is a participant in the Whole of Government Emergency Management framework developed by the ACT Government and the Australian Government. The AFP contributes to emergency preparedness, prevention, response and recovery plans.

2. AFP Communication Systems

Role of Police in emergency warning and response

Police services increasingly rely on real-time data provision in a mobile setting for which fast, reliable communications and data exchange are essential. Central to this is the need for appropriate spectrum space to operate interagency communications in emergencies. The AFP looks forward to the opportunity to be a part of the working group being established under the direction of the Attorney General's Department to look into the appropriate allocation of spectrum for law enforcement and emergency services purposes.

The role of Police in emergency warning and response will be dictated by the type of emergency. The type of emergency will identify the Lead Agency e.g. Bushfire ACT Rural Fire Service (RFS). Generally the Lead Agency will be responsible for issuing any emergency warnings through media releases. Support Agencies can contribute to these media releases.

Should the emergency warrant it, Standard Emergency Warning Signals (SEWS) can be implemented. The ACT Emergency Services Authority (ESA) has developed a number of memorandums of understanding (MOUs) with ACT media to provide for the provision of warnings and information to the community and advice to assist the community in preparing for emergencies.

In the event that a Police Operations Centre (POC), Incident Management Team (IMT), Emergency Operations Centre (EOC) or the Territory Crisis Centre (TCC) is activated the Public Information Coordination Centre (PICC) will also be activated and will coordinate the release of information to the community. AFP ACT Policing Media and Marketing Liaison Officers will be positioned in the PICC.

AFP ACT Policing Operations is responsible for dispatching a warning through mobile telephone SMS and landlines. Requests for such dispatches can be made by any of the emergency services.

AFP National

The AFP Operations Coordination Centre (AOCC) provides AFP National and International operations with a centralised monitoring, initial response, coordination and communications support service on a 24/7 basis.

The AOCC employs the following communication networks and emergency warning systems during an emergency or natural disaster;

- Radio Dispatch Console
- VoIP Telephony
- AFPNet
- ALERTS messaging system

These systems are critical to AFP/AOCC activities and are attached to Uninterrupted Power Supply (UPS) and generators.

Radio Dispatch Console

The radio dispatch console is a mission critical command and control solution designed to ensure optimal audio quality and reliable communication. The AFP Dispatch Console operates on an isolated network but has the capability to be expanded and integrated into a whole-of-government network.

AFPNet

AFPNet provides a secure IT medium to enable real time communication and information exchange across all AFP locations both domestically and internationally on a 24/7 basis.

ALERTS messaging system

The ALERTS messaging system is a fully automated critical communication system. The system assures immediate delivery of an alert to command, executive and other nominated recipients. Once initiated, dependent on requirements, ALERTS can communicate via voice and/or data to mobile phones, pagers, PDA's, laptops, desktops, VoIP telephone and conventional phones.

Each of the identified AFP systems has the ability to provide large and wide scale notifications and warnings to nominated recipients, of emergencies, provide a coordination medium during an emergency and assist in the recovery after an emergency.

3. Response to Terms of Reference

Background

AFP radio networks are compatible with the networks operated by other federal agencies and with those of state and territory police, with the exception of South Australia, Victoria and Tasmania. All other States and Territories either operate their entire network using compatible technology and spectrum, or have sufficient legacy networks available if their main systems have been made incompatible by upgrades or new installations. In addition, all states and territories, and the AFP, have access to frequencies reserved for National Counter Terrorism Committee (NCTC) incidents which could be used in times of natural disasters or emergencies. By reprogramming, AFP radios can be made fully interoperable with state and territory police where the frequency used locally is within switching range.

a. the effectiveness of communication networks, including radio, telephone, Internet and other alert systems (in particular drawing on the spate of emergencies and natural disasters of the 2010/2011 Australian summer):

(i) in warning of the imminent threat of an impending emergency

ACT Policing

Within the ACT ESA have entered into MOU's with the relevant ACT media outlets in relation to the broadcasting of the (SEWS).

Police radio networks would play little or no part in warning the general public, but would have a significant role to play in warning/informing first responders.

AFP National

The AFP maintains 24/7 communications through the AOCC with all Australian Government crisis coordination centres, the AFP International Liaison Network, and the AFP International Deployment Group (IDG) responsible for peacekeeping missions internationally. These communication channels provide a holistic capacity to achieve early warning of anticipated or impending incidents offshore that may impact on Australian interests domestically. The AOCC, utilising AFP communications systems, is positioned to disseminate such advice to all internal and external stakeholders to enable preparatory actions to be implemented.

Nationally, AFP communications systems would play no part in warning the general public.

(ii) to function in a coordinated manner during an emergency

Police radio networks play a significant role in coordinating the activities of first responders by providing an all-informed radio communications network in the coverage area. Portable repeaters would be used to extend coverage within the use of solar/battery/generator power supplies and portable antennae system.

The AFP through its Incident Coordination Centre (ICC) has well established Incident Coordination protocols with all other Australian Government crisis coordination centres to support situational awareness, and reciprocal information flows to enhance government coordination and achieve a common operating picture. The ICC also coordinates the AFP response during an emergency utilising communication mechanisms to support briefings and information exchange such as AFPNet, VoIP, radio networks and alerts messaging.

(iii) to assist in recovery after an emergency

Police radio networks would play a significant role in the recovery phase by allowing coordination of the activities of field operatives in the coverage area.

In recent emergencies and disasters, the AFP has supported jurisdictional response and recovery plans utilising AFP Incident Coordination protocols and communications systems to manage operations and provide accurate and timely situational awareness to government partners.

b. the impact of extended power blackouts on warning systems for state emergency services, including country fire brigades and landholders or home owners

The AFP has undertaken an analysis of the potential impact of extended power blackouts on its communications systems. For operational security reasons, the AFP does not place operational business continuity options in the public domain. Should the Committee wish further information on this aspect, the AFP would seek to present information “in-camera”.

c. the impact of emergencies and natural disasters on, and implications for, future communication technologies such as the National Broadband Network

The AFP, through its Project SPECTRUM, is evaluating current and future technologies to enhance technology and information components of the AFP, to enable improved policing and security outcomes.

d. the scope for better educating people in high-risk regions about the use of communications equipment to prepare for and respond

to a potential emergency or natural disaster

The general public would have no access to radio networks operated by Police and law enforcement, although they may have access to radio networks operated by volunteer emergency service organisations.

In the ACT, the responsibility of educating the community falls to the ESA Commissioner. This is a legislative responsibility as outlined in the *Emergencies Act 2004* - S8 Commissioners functions (2). The Commissioner (ESA) is responsible for the community education and improving community preparedness for emergencies.

e. new and emerging technologies including digital spectrum that could improve preparation for, responses to and recovery from, an emergency or natural disaster

Broadband spectrum such as the Digital Dividend is suitable to provide real time images to and from the scene of an incident. Its use would certainly improve the ability of decision makers to be properly informed when making decisions in both the response and recovery phases.

f. any other relevant matters

There is currently no national radio network or spectrum available in the State and Territories which would provide for an all-Australia-wide coverage of communication networks and emergency warning systems for emergency response.

4. Queensland Floods and Cyclone Yasi Experience

On 11 January 2011, Queensland Police Service (QPS) requested and received assistance from the AFP for bilateral assistance to aid with the recent Queensland Disasters relief. The AFP's Operational Response Group (ORG) provided Specialist Police assistance as required for Operation CLEMENT. During this period AFP and internal ORG communications were facilitated by the ORG's Communications Response Team (CRT) and the AFP's Radio Electronic Support (RES).

ORG Communications

During all phases of AFP assistance to QPS, the tactical communications used were AFP issued handheld and vehicle mounted Motorola UHF radios and SATPhones. At certain points during this assistance QPS provided QPS issued Motorola handheld radios to allow compatible tactical communications between QPS and AFP. Due to the close support and combined operations between QPS and AFP, there was no need for AFP UHF radios to be encoded with QPS keymat/crypto.

Due to the close physical location of QPS Command assets to AFP personnel deployed, no further means of tactical communications were needed to be utilised by AFP.

RES

RES experienced no major damage, system failures or power outages that affected their radio communications systems during the Queensland floods.

During Cyclone Yasi one radio site was damaged in Townsville. In Cairns the AFP site had a major power failure due to damage to an Energex Switchboard but the radio system was kept on the air due to generator backup.

5. Further Information and Briefings

The AFP can provide further detail and supporting information, including in camera where needed, during the Inquiry process.