

SENATE STANDING COMMITTEE ON LEGAL AND CONSTITUTIONAL AFFAIRS
ATTORNEY-GENERAL'S DEPARTMENT

Program 1.2

Question No. 65

Senator Humphries asked the following question at the hearing on 22 February 2011:

1. Can you tell me a bit about the Federal Government's funding of early warning systems?
2. How were these systems deployed in Queensland, Victoria and WA?

The answer to the honourable Senator's question is as follows:

1. Can you tell me a bit about the Federal Government's funding of early warning systems?

In 2009, the Australian Government committed \$26.3 million to assist States and Territories develop a national telephone-based emergency warning capability. This included:

- \$15 million for the establishment of the national telephone-based emergency warning system, *Emergency Alert*, which sends voice messages to fixed lines and text messages to mobile telephones based on the customer's registered service address. Victoria on behalf of the participating States and Territories has the contract with Telstra. The participating States and Territories have responsibility for ongoing operational and usage costs
- A contribution of \$0.65 million to States and Territories to develop public education material on the use of *Emergency Alert*
- \$1.35 million for the conduct of feasibility research and trials regarding the development of a capability enabling the delivery of warnings to mobile telephones based on the handset's location at the time of an emergency
- \$6.9 million for the operation of the Location-Based Number Store (LBNS). The LBNS is the central data source of geo-coded telephone number and address information on which *Emergency Alert*, and Western Australia's *StateAlert*, relies, and
- \$2.4 million (to 2012-13) for LBNS design, procurement and legal costs, as well as ongoing contract management and associated Departmental costs.

In September 2010, the Commonwealth also committed to meeting the establishment costs of the location-based capability, with the States and Territories responsible for the ongoing operational and usage costs.

The Commonwealth has made a deliberate decision not to announce the amount it has committed for the establishment of the location-based capability, so as not to jeopardise the current negotiations with the three national telecommunications carriers. Once the negotiations are completed, and to the Council of Australian Governments' satisfaction, the quantum of funding provided can be announced.

2. How were these systems deployed in Queensland, Victoria and WA?

Since it became operational on 1 December 2009, *Emergency Alert* has been used 274 times and issued in excess of 6.38 million messages (current as at 8 March 2011, source: Victorian Office of the Emergency Services Commissioner, '*Emergency Alert National Usage Spreadsheet*').¹

In Queensland, the system has issued more than 5.6 million messages. During the flooding in Queensland between 1 to 14 January 2011, 885,000 *Emergency Alert* messages were issued. Approximately 2.5 million messages were issued by *Emergency Alert* for Cyclone Yasi and the related storm surge.²

In Victoria, the system has issued approximately 519,000 messages. During the Victorian floods of January-February 2011, close to 120,000 messages were issued.³

Emergency Alert is not used in Western Australia. Western Australia uses its own telephone-based emergency warning system, StateAlert. The Western Australia Fire and Emergency Services Authority advises that between 26 November 2010 and 25 February 2011 StateAlert broadcast 19,108 SMS messages and 10,685 voice messages.⁴

¹ Current as at 8 March 2011, source: Victorian Office of the Emergency Services Commissioner, '*Emergency Alert National Usage Spreadsheet*'.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Director ICT, Fire and Emergency Services Authority of Western Australia.