

FINANCE AND PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION REFERENCES COMMITTEE
LESSONS TO BE LEARNED FOLLOWING THE 2019-20 BUSHFIRE SEASON
PUBLIC HEARING 12 AUGUST 2020

At the public hearing into lessons to be learned from the 2019-20 bushfire season, CRA undertook to provide written details of the examples and information given in evidence.

This document sets out this information.

- Regional commercial radio stations play a crucial role during times of emergency. The industry recognizes its responsibilities as one of the nation's main information sources during crises.
- Broadcast media is the most effective means by which emergency service organisations communicate with the public when critical events occur. Regional commercial radio plays a particularly important role, as both metropolitan and regional surveys show that around 80% of Australians listen to commercial radio. Regional commercial radio has 220 regional stations compared to the ABC's 45 stations/hubs
- All commercial radio stations are bound by and implement the *Commercial Radio Code of Practice*. Code 7 sets out commercial radio broadcasters' obligations in relation to the broadcast of emergency information. Specifically:
 - A licensee will, in consultation with appropriate emergency and essential service organizations, implement a set of internal procedures to enable the timely and accurate broadcast of warnings and information supplied by such organizations relating to an existing or threatened emergency.*
- Commercial radio broadcasters in Victoria, New South Wales, South Australia and Queensland have a Memoranda of Understanding (MoU) with local re emergency services organisations in those states which complement Code 7 and also set out useful processes governing the communication of information between the broadcasters and the emergency service organisations. An MoU is currently being developed for Western Australia.
- All commercial radio stations will break into and from their normal programming immediately preceding and during emergencies, to provide the best possible information service. The reporting includes both official forecasts and reports from local listeners.
- Many commercial radio stations begin preparing for emergencies and liaising with local services well in advance of the events.
 - For example, local radio stations have continuous contact with emergency services, throughout the year. They often provide feedback before and after the annual fire season, and update contact station details on a regular basis – at least once per year and often more often if staff change - to ensure the prompt communication of information during emergencies.
- The bushfire events last summer highlight the importance of having an emergency communication process that is as effective as possible, particularly in regional Australia.

Areas that could be improved

- Overall, the emergency services and radio stations did an excellent job of communicating to the public during a devastating fire period. However, **there are some areas that might be improved.**

Communication channels

- Most of the difficulties faced by our stations are based around communication channels. Our member stations provided a number of examples:
 - There can be problematic inconsistencies between 'official messaging' and information given directly via Facebook live feeds by local emergency services. For example, the Bairnsdale Fire Brigade captain warned on Facebook of an ember attack that would hit Bairnsdale at 3am one morning. No such **official** messaging was issued to the local commercial radio station and this led to worrying speculation. The station could not repeat the comments on air as they were at odds with official advice.
 - The sometimes slow messaging meant that people speculated on Facebook pages, leading to poor advice and assumptions that may have led the public into danger.
 - Stations had trouble getting in touch with emergency services. Communication with local commercial radio stations must be prioritised so that stations can broadcast timely and accurate messages. Stations should have direct access to an emergency services communications officer to communicate information faster and more reliably.
 - It was difficult to get the relevant authorities on the air regularly. This has improved over the years but is still not as easy as it should be. It might be helpful to have dedicated regionally based people whose role is to update listeners every couple of hours as the situation changes.
 - The warning messages were sometimes confusing as so many localities were included in each warning. Some messages were so long that broadcasters worried the main message would be forgotten.
 - Multiple SEWS alerts covering overlapping areas made it difficult to communicate clearly to audiences.
 - There were some inconsistencies between local council and emergency service updates. Council comms officers could be embedded in the emergency services teams to ensure consistent information is given.
 - There were some inconsistencies in advice given by NSW Fire and Rescue and the RFS.
 - For example, one Grant Broadcasters station was told by NSW Fire and Rescue to evacuate, and RFS told them no such advice had been issued. It should be noted that given the scale of the bushfires, these incidents were few and far between but should be eliminated if possible.

- Updated warning messages were sometimes not provided on the expiry of the previous message. Stations cannot continue to broadcast an 'expired' warning but frequently had nothing with which to replace the expired message. This meant that there could be no ongoing official warning about a situation, even though it continued to be serious. On occasions in Victoria and NSW this gap could last for over an hour, during which time the station was unable to broadcast any warnings.
- Alerts from NSW could be hard to find. The *Fires Near Me* App did not seem to be the central source of information. No texts were sent alerting stations to emails or updates and community information for NSW was situated in 2 different sections of the website.
- The volume of messages meant that some key warnings were buried. Of real importance was the decision on Sunday the 29th of January to ask Victorians to leave areas of Gippsland. This message was placed in an **Advice** (not a higher level notification of warning) and was picked up and broadcast by local stations. However local broadcasters felt it could have easily been missed. *Advice* messages are at a station's discretion and if the Victorian stations had chosen not to support the message this may have had some consequences.
- Consistency between different States could be improved. For example, watch and act had different meanings in NSW and VIC. Many journalists work across both States so it was very confusing to ensure the correct messages were conveyed over the air. The warnings issued by the RFS in NSW and CFA in Victoria are also different in detail and format, making it difficult for communities that straddle the State borders.
- Communities relied heavily on battery operated radios. Supplies ran out in many local centres. One of our members suggested that governments run campaigns encouraging people to include battery operated radios in their bushfire plans.
- There is also a continuing issue with emergency service authorities advising listeners to tune into the ABC for updates, without mentioning the local commercial radio stations. This flies in face of the fact that there are 220 local commercial radio stations across 100 regional areas of Australia while the ABC has only 45 stations/hubs, and, as mentioned earlier, that around 80% of Australian radio listeners habitually listen to their local commercial radio station.
- One example of this unacceptable situation is, for example when the ACT government advised residents to listen to ABC radio for updates. This advice was included in a pamphlet that was delivered door to door. The government has also erected road signs over the last few years advising motorists to tune to ABC 666 for emergency information.
- We are not saying it is a choice between either commercial stations or the ABC. For the safety of listeners, attention should be drawn to both.

Infrastructure repair/protection

- It is vital that radio broadcast infrastructure is protected and repaired as efficiently as possible during any emergency. One of our member networks, SCA, has provided information on its experience during the recent bushfires.
 - BAI Communications manages SCA's infrastructure. SCA were able to leverage BA's capabilities which meant it had fire drops on sites, access to sites by helicopters and priority access through road blocks.
 - Only a small number of SCA services were impacted and these were generally low population area, the impact was generally due to lack of standby power.
 - In some cases, SCA understands that BA was hindered in obtaining access to bushfire areas and was delayed in getting to sites to restore emergency broadcast services. **We suggest that a formal policy to facilitate access for broadcast repairs should be implemented by emergency services.**
- We should reiterate again that emergency services do a wonderful job, and that emergency services organisations and commercial radio broadcasters, work exceptionally well together, in incredibly difficult circumstances over a prolonged period of time.
- However, we were asked for suggestions for improvements which is what we have submitted. Without excellent communications between commercial radio (and other media sectors) and emergency services organisations, many more lives could have been lost.
- With further discussion and refinement of communication processes prior to the next fire season, we think any problems could be addressed, to ensure even better communication and infrastructure protection during future emergencies.