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Senate Finance and Public Administration Committees
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SUBMISSION TO SENATE FINANCE AND PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION COMMITTEE'S INQUIRY INTO LESSONS TO BE LEARNED IN RELATION TO THE AUSTRALIAN BUSHFIRE SEASON 2019-20

The Community Broadcasting Association of Australia (CBAA) – the peak body and national representative organisation for over 450 community radio broadcasters across Australia – welcomes the opportunity to participate in the Senate Finance and Public Administration Committee's inquiry regarding lessons to be learned in relation to the Australian bushfire season 2019-20.

Throughout the recent bushfire emergencies and in the aftermath, community radio remained a vital source of local emergency information and a space for community connection. This inquiry provides an opportunity to identify the challenges faced by regional community radio stations during the 2019-20 bushfire season and identify the future risks and needs of regional community radio broadcasters to ensure their critical services remain on-air during future natural disasters, emergencies and in recovery.

Our submission focuses on:

- The role played by local community broadcasters during the 2019-20 bushfire emergencies and in recovery;
- The challenges stations faced both during and in the aftermath of these natural disasters;
- The Victorian emergency broadcasting model and how it could be adapted as part of a national approach to improve emergency communications during bushfires; and
- The need for involvement and integration of the community radio sector in the Government's recovery programs and natural disaster planning.

In doing so, we have sought to provide value to the Committee's deliberations and outline a starting point for our sector's further engagement with the Committee, the Commonwealth and State and Territory Governments to ensure community radio stations across the country can play their critical role both during and after bushfires in the future.

Community radio's role during natural disasters and challenges faced

Almost six million people listen each week to the 450+ community radio stations across the country¹, 76% of which are in regional or remote areas.² In many of these areas, community radio is the only

¹ Community Broadcasting Association of Australia (2019). National Listener Survey Australia Fact Sheet Wave #2 December 2019 [online] Available at: www.cbba.org.au/sites/default/files/media/McNair%20yellowSquares%20-%20NLS%20Fact%20Sheet%20-%20Australia%20-%202019%20-%20Wave%20%232%20-%2020190101.pdf

² Community Broadcasting Association of Australia (2019). State of the Sector Report [online] Available at: <https://www.cbba.org.au/article/state-community-radio-sector-report>

local media source. For many non-English speaking communities, community radio is the only source of information and news available in their language and delivered in a culturally relevant way.

First Nations community radio stations and media organisations are also the fastest and most responsive conduits for getting information through to First Nations communities in a way that is culturally appropriate, accessible, in-language and timely. In 89 regions across the country First Nations radio stations are the only radio services available.

Community radio stations play a critical role in communities, particularly regional communities, both during natural disasters and in the recovery. The devastating bushfires that impacted Queensland, New South Wales, South Australia and Victoria towards the end of 2019 and into 2020 saw over 80 community radio stations broadcasting in fire affected areas or to fire affected communities.

These stations are closely linked to their local areas and communities, drawing their announcing, producing and support volunteers and staff directly from the towns and locales where they broadcast. Many stations, while not directly affected, have had station volunteers and members who have been directly impacted through the loss of property and sadly at times, even friends or family.

Community radio stations in regional, rural and remote parts of the country are by their very nature, hyperlocal conduits for information and news. In many fire affected areas when power, internet and mobile reception went down community radio stations played a critical role in emergency broadcasting and delivering local information on fire threats, road closures and available community evacuation and relief services. In many cases this included dedicated airtime for updates from local emergency services.

Community radio is complimentary to other broadcasting services, particularly the ABC. Where the ABC often has wide-area coverage, community radio offers nuanced, hyperlocal expertise and information. During the bushfires, the ABC did not always have announcers in the affected regions and at times, could not possibly get announcers into hotspots such as Mallacoota. To broadcast updates, the ABC utilised the community radio announcers in Mallacoota, who continued emergency broadcasting knowing that their own homes would be fire-affected.

In some areas, emergency broadcasting by community radio was the only source of local information. About 60 km from Canberra, Braidwood's community radio station, Braidwood FM, had only just expanded its transmission range when fires threatened the town of about 1,600 people. In late November 2019, station volunteers broadcast 14 days of near continuous emergency coverage of the Tallaganda National Park fire. Volunteers put hourly updates to air from the Rural Fire Service, directly connecting listeners to the information source. Portable battery-powered radios sold out in town. The new transmission range meant that locals in more remote areas could now hear the station's information and updates.

During the bushfire threat, many of these stations faced severe pressure on their people – volunteer staff struggling with exhaustion and trauma – and damage and loss of power to broadcasting equipment and resources. For example, on 31 December 2019, fires destroyed the main transmitter and link tower at Mt Wandera for Eurobodalla's community radio station 2EAR FM – also taking out the ABC's transmitter. 2EAR FM was off air until the station technician and support team were able to temporarily install a transmitter at the station premises one week later, at a reduced output.

With the fire threat now abated and the process of rebuilding both community infrastructure and spirit underway, local community radio stations are again playing a critical role assisting communities to recover – through fundraising efforts, acting as catalysts for community dialogue and building resilience, helping combat social isolation and, importantly, connecting people to the critical services they need.

We have provided an outline of recent stories and specific 2019-20 bushfire case studies in **Attachment A**.

Recommendation 1: The CBAA recommends that the Committee examines and recognises the valuable role played by community broadcasters during and after the 2019-20 bushfires, in informing communities and contributing to community connection and resilience. The CBAA can assist in the facilitation and collection of more case studies as required.

Victoria's emergency broadcasting model and the need for a national approach

Increasingly community broadcasters are taking on the responsibility of providing warnings and other information to their communities in times of emergency. In such cases it is vital that community broadcasters provide accurate information to listeners from official sources.

There is currently no national approach to how community radio stations are engaged for emergency broadcasting during natural disasters. We believe the Victorian model could be adapted to form part of a national approach.

In Victoria, community radio stations can be certified as official emergency broadcasters to run formal emergency broadcasting services. This is often because the station has the resources, knowledge and desire to play this role, and might be located in a region where the ABC and other broadcasters do not reach or cannot offer the hyperlocalised knowledge that community services can. In Victoria, community broadcasters can then secure a formal relationship with Emergency Management Victoria (EMV) by signing an MOU.

This MOU outlines the key obligations of emergency broadcasters. To become emergency broadcasters, Victorian community stations must demonstrate that they are able to, among other things, broadcast emergency warnings and information 24 hours a day, 7 days a week as directed; broadcast the Standard Emergency Warning Signal (SEWS) when directed; and use best endeavours to make sure information that is broadcast during emergencies is accurate.

Because of this agreement, community radio stations in Victoria report that their working relationship with EMV is strong, information they receive timely, and the warnings and information read and broadcast verbatim. This formal arrangement came out of a review of the 2009 Black Saturday fires.

At time of writing, there are at least ten community radio stations in Victoria that have formal arrangements with EMV. This is an effective system that allows community radio stations with the resources to opt in to be designated official emergency broadcasters. Those who do not want to or do not have the resources to opt in, can still broadcast and share emergency information. In many cases, the information these broadcasters receive is through their relationships with local emergency services – vital relationships which enables stations to still provide hyperlocal information.

In other states and territories, there are traditionally no formal arrangements between state/territory bodies and community broadcasters. Many stations, however, still play a vital role sharing and broadcasting emergency information obtained via their relationships with local emergency services. For example, Sounds of the Mountains in NSW's Tumut became the region's go-to station when mobile phones and apps went down, and commercial radio and the ABC dropped out at times due to power outages. A recent \$100,000 investment by the Foundation for Rural & Regional Renewal will enable the station to replace and upgrade backup transmission equipment and battery backup systems – ensuring the station's ability to continue and strengthen emergency broadcasting in the future.

The establishment of formalised partnerships with state/territory bodies in jurisdictions other than Victoria will ensure stations get accurate and timely information and best understand their obligations.

Given the important role community broadcasters play during natural disasters the CBAA recommends that other states and territories establish more formal relationships with community broadcasters, who want to and have the resources to be official emergency broadcasters. The Commonwealth Government can play a leadership and coordination role here.

Recommendation 2: The CBAA recommends that the Committee examines different state and territory methods for working with community broadcasters to distribute local emergency information during bushfires and other crises.

Integrating community broadcasting services into Government recovery programs and natural disaster planning

The small budgets that community radio stations operate within, and the difficulty of quickly mobilising 'community capital' to face funding shortfalls in the same way as financial capital, makes stations vulnerable to shifts in their existing income sources, especially where these are unforeseeable and outside of their control.

Feedback to the CBAA from community stations in fire affected areas note that sponsorship has been increasingly hard to secure because local sponsors are often businesses which have also been impacted. Such challenges only serve to make an already hard situation worse, now compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic.

With the Commonwealth Government rolling out its bushfire response – including funding, policy and reviews – the CBAA has proposed a collaborative project that:

1. Identifies the challenges faced and the immediate needs of regional community broadcasting stations whose operations have been impacted by the bushfires.
2. Identifies the future risks and needs of regional community broadcasters to ensure critical services remain on-air during natural disasters, emergencies and in recovery.
3. Reviews the operating, funding and regulatory environment and how this can be improved to assist community radio stations perform their critical role both during and after natural disasters and emergencies.

Such a project should collaborate with state and territory governments and is an important step towards building the resilience and capacity of regional community broadcasters so that they can continue contributing to community safety and cohesion during and after local emergencies.

Recommendation 3: The CBAA recommends that in its inquiry, the Committee examines the future risks and needs of community broadcasters to ensure their critical services remain on-air during bushfires and in recovery.

As the peak body for the community broadcasting sector, and an active participant in research, policy and planning, the CBAA is committed to further sharing our ideas, experience and knowledge with the Royal Commission to ensure community radio stations across the country can play their critical role both during and after natural disasters in the future.

We would be happy to facilitate for the Committee, the opportunity to engage directly with stations recently impacted by bushfires.

Kind regards,

Jon Bisset
Chief Executive Officer

Attachment A: Case studies from the 2019-20 bushfires

New South Wales

Braidwood FM – Braidwood, NSW

About 60 km from Canberra, Braidwood's community radio station, Braidwood FM, had only just expanded its transmission range when fires threatened the town of about 1,600 people.

In late November, a rapidly changing fire in Tallaganda National Park kicked off 14 days of near continuous emergency coverage. Station volunteers put hourly updates to air from the Rural Fire Service, directly connecting listeners to the information source. For some, it was the only source of information and portable battery-powered radios sold out in town.

It was days into the broadcast when the volunteers realised just how many people were relying on the station. Community members were coming to the studio to drop off food and gift baskets to thank the volunteers. The new transmission range meant that locals in more remote areas could now hear the station's information and updates.

At the end of the long stint, one of the listeners went into the station to share their story: *'I was in Braidwood but I'm widowed, I was scared, and I've got a sister over in Farrington. And I knew by listening that she was OK and that the odds were that we were going to be OK.'* The station was reported on in the [Canberra Times](#) and [The Land](#).

2EAR – Eurobodalla, NSW

At some time before 8.45 am on 31 December 2019, bushfires destroyed 2EAR FM's main transmitter and link tower at Mt Wandera. The station was off air until the station technician and support team were able to [temporarily install a transmitter](#) at the station premises at 3.30 PM on the 9 January 2020. The output was at a reduced level due to the logistics and the acquisition of a new antenna.

Rhema FM – Manning Great Lakes, NSW

After being off-air for about seven weeks due to the transmitter site being destroyed by bushfires, Rhema FM 106.5 is now broadcasting again from a new mobile transmitter hut. After fire raged through the area on the evening 12 November, the power was restored on 30 December.

Sounds of the Mountains, Tumut NSW (and servicing Gundagai and Adelong regions)

The station became the region's go-to station when mobile phones and apps went down, and commercial radio and the ABC dropped out at times due to power outages. A recent \$100,000 investment by the Foundation for Rural & Regional Renewal will enable the station to replace and upgrade backup transmission equipment and battery backup systems – ensuring the station's ability to continue emergency broadcasting in the future.

Highland FM – Bowral, NSW

Throughout the worst of the fires in early January 2020, the station provided regular updates from 8:30am to 3am. As part of the recovery effort, the station assisted in the promotional efforts for [FireAid 2020](#), a benefit concert held in Bowral, which raised more than \$300,000 for the community.

89.1 Radio Blue Mountains – Katoomba, NSW

The station was very active in providing emergency broadcasting information over the Christmas 2019 period. The station President is also active as part of the NSW RFS, ensuring that the information provided was done so accurately and responsibly.

TLC FM – Yamba, NSW

Fires threatened the area as of September 2019. The station maintained contact with the NSW RFS throughout, providing the community with up to date information.

Loving Life FM 103.1 – Grafton, NSW

While the station was largely unaffected by bushfires in their region, they were very active as part of fundraising initiatives for local brigades of the NSW RFS, helping to raise money for the Coutts Crossing and Nymboida brigades.

STA FM – Inverell, NSW

During the worst of the bushfire crisis, the fires were approximately five kilometres away from the town. Throughout this time, the breakfast show hosted a representative from the NSW RFS and other updates were broadcast throughout the day. The station has been actively involved in community initiatives adjacent to the bushfire crisis. 65 pallets of Kelloggs cereal were donated to farmers in town as part of [an initiative overseen by the station](#) and the Lions Club as part of drought relief.

Eden Community Radio – Eden, NSW

Station is now fine after being off air temporarily due to a power outage.

Ten FM – Tenterfield, NSW

Ten FM broadcasts to towns in both NSW and Queensland that were under threat from bushfires since September 2019. During that time, the station was active both on-air and online in regard to the dissemination of emergency information. The station liaised with different emergency services as their broadcast crosses state boundaries. Station noted an uptick in people tuning in online.

Queensland

Rim FM 100.1 - Boonah, QLD

Station was under threat in September 2019. The station was active in broadcasting emergency warnings, as well as other information, including interviews with representatives from the local fire service and the Mayor.

Victoria

3MGB – Mallacoota, VIC

3MGB [broadcast for 48 hours straight](#) during the middle of the fire crisis with only a scarce number of volunteers. The station provided on the ground coverage for the ABC and other media outlets, which were unable to reach the epicentre, highlighting the important role community radio can play in ensuring stories get out to the general public as well as sharing information with communities at risk.

REG-FM – East Gippsland, VIC

Since the fires came through their region, the station planned to work with sponsors to develop Community Service Announcements with a focus on disaster recovery. Various community groups have reached out to the station regarding their role as a voice for the community as a means of facilitating any fundraising and recovery efforts.

3HCR, High Country Radio – Omeo, VIC

The nearest fire came about two kilometres away, with a wind change saving the station. The station reported running nonstop, ensuring fire affected residents were looked after and getting the supplies they needed.

Alpine Radio – Mount Beauty, VIC

Alpine Radio is an official Emergency Broadcaster in the Kiewa and Ovens Valleys. Since lightning started bushfires on New Year's Eve, volunteers broadcast numerous warnings from Forest Fire Management Victoria over two weeks. On Saturday 4 January the station had several volunteers broadcast throughout the night, ensuring that Emergency Warnings and Evacuate Now messages were broadcast in a timely manner and in accordance with their MOU with Emergency Management Victoria.

Alpine Radio also shared a live audio feed from one of the many community meetings and the station has heard that they helped many in the community feel reassured and informed.