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Commonwealth Government response to  
Environment and Communications  
References Committee report

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*The capacity of communication networks  
and emergency warning systems to deal  
with emergencies and natural disasters*

November 2012



## **INTRODUCTION**

The Senate Environment and Communications References Committee tabled its report, *The capacity of communication networks and emergency warning systems to deal with emergencies and natural disasters* on 23 November 2011. The report contains six recommendations. The Commonwealth Government response to each of the recommendations made by the Senate References Committee, are provided below.

While the Commonwealth has a national coordination role, primary responsibility for the protection of life, property and the environment rests with the states and territories, who are the first responders to emergencies in their jurisdictions. Therefore, state and territory emergency management agencies have full autonomy in relation to: (i) whether and when to issue an emergency warning, (ii) which delivery mechanisms to use to disseminate the emergency warning, and (iii) the content of the warning. Individual states and territories choose which warning technologies to adopt and when to activate them in accordance with the specific circumstances of an incident.

All states and territories have disaster or emergency plans that include a communications component for the dissemination of rapid onset emergency warnings to the community. At the Commonwealth level, the Bureau of Meteorology (the Bureau) issues warnings and watch notices via the broadcast media, HF Radio and Fax, recorded telephone and the internet, directly to the public for weather warnings (such as severe thunderstorm, high sea, flood and tropical cyclone warnings) and, in conjunction with Geoscience Australia, also issues tsunami warnings. Warnings issued by these agencies also inform the warning messages that state and territory control agencies disseminate to the public.

The states and territories are also responsible for the communications systems within their jurisdiction. The Commonwealth's role is to support public safety operations by, inter alia, making adequate provision of spectrum for use by agencies involved in the defence or national security of Australia, law enforcement, or the provision of emergency services, including for use by other public or community services.

## RESPONSE TO RECOMMENDATIONS

### Recommendation 1

**2.11 The committee recommends that interoperability of narrowband voice radiocommunications between federal, state and territory emergency service organisations is achieved as soon as practicable and that all services attending major incidents be compelled to maintain a common emergency communications platform to ensure seamless real time communication from and to the Incident Controller.**

#### **Commonwealth Position:** Supported

The Government supports this recommendation, noting all jurisdictions are moving towards mobile radio networks that support real time and seamless communications.

The Attorney-General's Department (AGD) through its membership on the National Coordinating Committee for Government Radiocommunications (NCCGR) is working with the states and territories to achieve improved narrowband voice communications interoperability within the indicative time frame set out in the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) endorsed framework. This work includes achieving consensus amongst all jurisdictions on technologies and Standard Operating Protocols that will assist with moving towards fully interoperable radio networks and operating procedures. The Government understands that the COAG endorsed framework does not prescribe a single technology for jurisdictions (and agencies within them); rather that each jurisdiction as part of their current and future procurement cycles considers technologies that will enable voice communications interoperability with other Emergency Service Organisations (ESOs) throughout Australia. Accordingly, relevant Commonwealth agencies are in the process of planning to transition their voice communications to systems that will be interoperable with state and territory ESOs operating within spectrum harmonised for government use in the 400 MHz band.

## **Recommendation 2**

**2.50 The committee recommends the Commonwealth Government allocate sufficient spectrum for dedicated broadband public protection and disaster relief (PPDR) radiocommunications in Australia.**

**2.51 The committee further recommends that any allocation of broadband spectrum to emergency service organisations (ESOs) for PPDR must be provided on the basis of interoperability amongst Australian ESOs and with ESO counterparts overseas.**

### **Commonwealth Position:** Noted

The *Radiocommunications Act 1992* states that the object of the Act is to provide for management of the radiofrequency spectrum in order to:

- (a) maximise, by ensuring the efficient allocation and use of the spectrum, the overall public benefit derived from using the radiofrequency spectrum;
- (b) make adequate provision of the spectrum:
  - (i) for use by agencies involved in the defence or national security of Australia, law enforcement or the provision of emergency services; and
  - (ii) for use by other public or community services;
- (c) provide a responsive and flexible approach to meeting the needs of users of the spectrum;
- (d) encourage the use of efficient radiocommunication technologies so that a wide range of services of an adequate quality can be provided;
- (e) provide an efficient, equitable and transparent system of charging for the use of spectrum, taking account of the value of both commercial and non-commercial use of spectrum;
- (f) support the communications policy objectives of the Commonwealth Government;
- (g) provide a regulatory environment that maximises opportunities for the Australian communications industry in domestic and international markets;
- (h) promote Australia's interests concerning international agreements, treaties and conventions relating to radiocommunications or the radiofrequency spectrum.

The then Commonwealth Attorney-General, the Hon Robert McClelland MP, and the Minister for Broadband, Communications and the Digital Economy, Senator the Hon Stephen Conroy, co-chaired a roundtable meeting on 10 May 2011 on the matter of public safety mobile broadband. The key outcome of that meeting was the establishment of a multijurisdictional high-level officials' Public Safety Mobile Broadband Steering Committee to progress this work, led nationally by the Commonwealth Attorney-General's Department and the Department of Broadband, Communications and the Digital Economy.

Membership of the Committee includes representatives of the following key national stakeholder groups, committees and agencies:

- the COAG Senior Officials Group
- the National Policing Senior Officers Group
- the National Counter-Terrorism Committee
- the Australia New Zealand Police Advisory Agency
- the Australasian Fire and Emergency Service Authorities Council
- the Council of Ambulance Authorities
- the National Coordinating Committee for Government Radiocommunications
- the Law Enforcement and Security Radio Spectrum Committee, and
- the Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA).

The Committee has analysed public safety mobile communications needs, developed models to meet those needs and collected information to assist the ACMA in its determination of spectrum requirements.

The Commonwealth has worked with the states and territories to develop a national implementation plan for a nationally interoperable public safety mobile broadband capability. In parallel with this activity, the Commonwealth has considered whether radio spectrum should be allocated and, if so, what the quantum of a possible allocation would be.

The Commonwealth announced on 29 October 2012 that it would make provision for 10 MHz from the 800 MHz band for the specific purpose of realising a dedicated, nationally interoperable public safety mobile broadband cellular 4G data capability.

The offer of the spectrum to the states and territories will be at a Public Interest Price and is conditional on factors including:

- the capability being nationally interoperable
- the states and territories funding all costs associated with designing, building, equipping, maintaining and operating the capability, and
- an agreement to provide reasonable access to state and territory networks by relevant Commonwealth agencies.

In terms of interoperability with counterparts overseas, this will be guided by the domestic approaches that those countries take as well as future outcomes of key fora such as regional radio harmonisation in region 3 (the Asia-Pacific region in which Australia sits).

### **Recommendation 3**

**3.63 The committee recommends that the Commonwealth Government together with national, state and territory emergency service organisations and radio and television broadcasters, develop a secure database of up-to-date contact details for key personnel to be used during an emergency.**

#### **Commonwealth Position:** Noted

The Commonwealth, state and territory agencies and the ESOs all have media services and dedicated databases in place that perform this role.

The Australian Government will work with the states and territories, through the Australia-New Zealand Emergency Management Committee (ANZEMC) (formerly the National Emergency Management Committee), to effectively coordinate the maintenance of appropriate contact details in both emergency service and media organisations for use during an emergency.

### **Recommendation 4**

**3.69 The committee recommends the Commonwealth Government require guaranteed access to emergency call services for people with a disability at all times.**

#### **Commonwealth Position:** Noted

The Government is a member of the National Forum on Emergency Warnings to the Community which has recently completed drafting the document, 'Inclusive Communications Guidelines for Emergency Managers'. These guidelines, when finalised, will be used as a tool to help emergency managers understand the requirements to assist people with disabilities during emergencies. They are intended to be used in conjunction with each state and territory's own policies and procedures.

The Government is aware that people who are deaf, hearing and/or speech impaired often have limited access to emergency services outside of the home as a result of not being able to access a teletypewriter to call the National Relay Service (NRS) dedicated emergency number 106. In response to this need, the Government included mobile access to text-based emergency services for people who are deaf, hearing impaired and/or speech impaired in the new NRS tender. On 15 August, the Telecommunications Universal Service Management Agency (TUSMA) issued a request for tender to identify and select a company(s) to provide the NRS for the next five years. The tender has now closed and a public announcement is expected in early 2013.

On 12-13 January 2011, the NRS experienced interruption for nearly 24 hours as a result of severe flooding in Brisbane where the NRS call centre is based. However, it should be noted that this interruption did not affect access to the 106 emergency number. Since that time, the Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA) has been working with the NRS service provider, Australian Communication Exchange (ACE), on lessons learnt and

opportunities to better mitigate disruptions in the event of similar emergency situations. This has resulted in a number of new initiatives, including new redundancy strategies and software improvements, to better prioritise certain types of calls.

### **Recommendation 5**

**3.81 The committee recommends emergency service organisations in collaboration with television and radio broadcasters, the print media and other relevant organisations, use regular and ongoing public education well in advance of an emergency situation as an opportunity to teach the public about their responsibilities during an emergency and how they can appropriately prepare themselves for such an event.**

#### **Commonwealth Position: Noted**

The Commonwealth notes this recommendation is directed at emergency service organisations, radio broadcasters, the print media and other relevant organisations. However, in a broader context, the Commonwealth and all state and territory governments are implementing the COAG National Strategy for Disaster Resilience 2011 (the Strategy).

The Strategy focuses on building disaster resilient communities across Australia, including educating people about risks and that disaster resilience is a shared responsibility. Aligned to this Strategy, the Commonwealth delivers education programs including:

- School education resources and teaching aids including: the online ‘Dingo Creek’ interactive disaster preparedness and recovery game and related teaching material, the online ‘Digital Stories’ series where students who have been involved in disasters record their stories, recently released ‘DisasterMapper’, an online and Google Map based product to allow students to investigate disasters relevant to them or to their studies, and soon to be released ‘Before the Storm’ phone application (app), a teaching resource aimed at improving preparedness
- Ensuring disaster resilience is considered in the current national curriculum review for Australia
- Producing source materials for vulnerable communities including those of a non-English speaking background, such as the recent Pictorial Storyboards, and
- Providing all these materials, together with a range of publication and brochure prototypes, available online at the national emergency website [www.em.gov.au](http://www.em.gov.au).

The recently released DisasterWatch phone app provides access to emergency and disaster information in a mobile device format derived from authoritative sources in the states and territories and agencies. The app also provides public educational information, such as how to prepare for various hazard events. More than 11,000 downloads of the app have occurred since its launch in December 2011.

## **Recommendation 6**

**4.33 The committee recommends the government consider granting public broadcasters priority access to fuel during times of emergency for the purpose of broadcasting emergency warnings and information, and in a way that does not impede the ability of emergency service organisations to access fuel.**

### **Commonwealth Position:** Noted

Australia's state and territory governments have constitutional responsibility for planning and coordinating the response to fuel shortages within their territorial boundaries and have appropriate legislation and associated response plans in place to manage such emergencies.

Whilst every jurisdiction has legislation in place to address a liquid fuel supply emergency, not every emergency will trigger the use of that legislation. Many emergencies that include localised fuel distribution issues, but which do not include an overall fuel supply problem for the jurisdiction, are managed under general emergency response legislation rather than liquid fuel specific legislation.

As such, during an emergency within a particular jurisdiction, determinations about access to fuels, including for public broadcasters, will be a decision for the relevant state or territory government.

At a national level, the *Liquid Fuel Emergency Act 1984* (LFE Act) grants the Commonwealth Minister for Resources and Energy the power, by legislative instrument, to identify a person or organisation as an essential user of fuel for the purpose of a national liquid fuel emergency. Declaration of a national liquid fuel emergency under the LFE Act remains a low probability event, as it would require a severe (i.e. prolonged and widespread) national shortage of fuel.