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Committee Secretary  
Senate Standing Committee on Environment and Communications  
PO Box 6100  
Parliament House  
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Dear Sir/Madam

**Re: Inquiry into the capacity of communication networks and emergency warning systems to deal with emergencies and natural disasters**

Thank you for providing Free TV with the opportunity to appear before the Senate Committee on 8 August 2011. This letter provides Free TV's responses to questions taken on notice, and attaches the requested document regarding coverage and staffing at the commercial free-to-air television networks during some recent emergencies.

**1. Were there any debriefs or follow up meetings with emergency services following recent emergencies?**

Locally based stations (for example, those based in Townsville and Bendigo) organised individual debriefs with emergency services and local government authorities on an as-needs basis following the recent emergencies. These typically involved the news directors meeting with relevant emergency services (fire, police) and local government to establish the successful elements of the recent coverage, discuss what could be improved in future, and ensure that all parties had up to date and accurate information for key contact people in the event of any future emergencies.

The experiences in the emergencies and the ensuing debriefs have generally improved communications between the commercial free-to-air television broadcasters and emergency services. This has resulted in ongoing dialogues in relation to potential emergency situations, ensuring that the networks (and their viewers) have access to the most accurate and timely information available.

**2. Did networks screen pre-warnings of recent emergencies, as well as coverage of the actual emergency?**

Where information was available in the lead up to recent emergencies, it was broadcast by the commercial free-to-air television networks.

The Victorian bushfires was an example where there were no pre-warning broadcasts, because the emergency was not anticipated.

However, for the flooding on the eastern seaboard and Cyclone Yasi, all of the commercial free-to-air television broadcasters provided substantial pre-warning information and extensive, live coverage of press briefings conducted by government and emergency services.

This follows close co-operation between broadcasters and emergency services organisations, in line with the *National Guidelines for the Request and Broadcast of Emergency Warnings*. These Guidelines are an initiative of the Australian Government and have been developed in consultation

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with State and Territory Governments and all peak broadcast media bodies, including Free TV Australia. A copy of the Guidelines was tabled at the hearing.

For example, in the lead up to Cyclone Yasi, the Seven Network's local offices in Maroochydore aired lower frame messages and "crawls" every hour in affected markets. The warnings were targeted only to areas that were directly in, and adjacent to, the path of the Cyclone. Once the formal Cyclone warning had been issued, pre-warning coverage was upgraded to include maps and detailed emergency services information. These were broadcast every hour (except between 1 am and 6 am). The corresponding metropolitan stations also provided extensive pre-warning coverage, including information about timing, emergency procedures and press briefings.

**3. What impact has the requirement for commercial stations to broadcast emergency information had on programming and advertising schedules in the past?**

Displacement decisions are generally made in consultation with senior management. In practice, there is no question about displacement of programming and advertising for genuine emergencies, pre-warning broadcasts and the provision of emergency information. In the recent emergencies, commercial free-to-air television networks displaced programming and advertising to carry the government and emergency press briefings live.

**4. Are they required to adhere to the Commercial Television Industry Code of Practice strictly, or is there some flexibility in their application?**

The Commercial Television Code of Practice operates as part of a regulatory framework which includes the *Broadcasting Services Act 1992* (BSA) and Standards made by the Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA). Under section 123 of the BSA, industry groups like Free TV Australia develop codes of practice in consultation with the ACMA. Once implemented, the ACMA monitors these codes and deals with unresolved complaints made under them. The provisions in the Code are strictly adhered to by broadcasters and enforced by the ACMA. The ACMA has a range of enforcement powers (including, for example, monetary fines and enforceable undertakings) and applies these to breaches of the Code.

**5. How often would a commercial station receive a written notification from the Minister requiring that persons authorised by the Minister take control over the content on the broadcaster's facilities for emergency warnings purposes?**

Free TV and the commercial free-to-air television networks are not aware any instance where the Minister has requested control of the broadcaster's facilities under subclause 7(1)(e) of Schedule 2 to the BSA, or under any previous equivalent provision.

Generally, the commercial free-to-air television broadcasters consider that they have a clear responsibility to provide information to the public and report on emergencies. They report the news and communicate key information to the public because that is their role as journalists and broadcasters.

**6. What would be the implications if the Government decided to auction off the 2.5Ghz spectrum for use by high-speed wireless broadband services? What alternative spectrum options would be available to commercial TV operators?**

As noted in Free TV's submission to the Senate Committee, free-to-air broadcasters rely on access to the 2.5 GHz spectrum band in providing coverage of emergencies. Networks Seven, Nine and Ten together with the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC), are currently licensed to use the 2.5GHz band for Television Outside Broadcasting (TOB) on an Australia-wide basis.

TOB comprises a number of activities including electronic news gathering, television outside broadcasts and electronic field production all of which are heavily deployed during coverage of natural disasters and other emergency events. Continued access to spectrum for TOB is vital if free-to-air broadcasters are to continue to be able to serve the public interest in providing coverage of natural disasters and other emergencies.

The ACMA is currently coordinating a process to re-purpose and re-allocate (auction) the 2.5 GHz band so as to make it suitable for new, high-speed wireless access services. This involves the identification of alternative spectrum access for TOB and electronic news gathering. Whilst alternative spectrum has been identified which has the potential to support TOB operation, further work is required to ensure broadcasters are able to deliver an equivalent service to that currently provided. Without access to truly comparable spectrum, broadcast coverage of emergencies will be compromised and limited in scope. Additional costs may be also payable by broadcasters in transitioning to the new spectrum.

Unless properly handled, this process stands to have a significant impact on the future coverage of natural disasters.

**7. To what extent do the websites currently associated with the commercial free-to-air channels broadcast emergency warnings? Would the provision of such warnings on the internet remove the requirement for the stations to broadcast the warnings on-air?**

Although there are some differences, in general the commercial free-to-air television broadcasters will place important information that is broadcast, including warnings, on their websites. Some networks have moved recently to enhance these services, for example, by ensuring that the web news team is co-located with the television news room, or uploading extra or extended news stories onto their websites.

The news directors from each of the commercial free-to-air television networks indicated that in an emergency situation, they will not usually direct people to their own network websites. General practice across the industry is to direct viewers to official government or emergency services websites (such as the Bureau of Meteorology or State Emergency Service) for assistance and the most relevant up-to-date information. Relevant website addresses are provided on-air. In some instances, links are also provided to those sites from the network websites.

Representatives from news services in Queensland also commented favourably on the use of social media by the emergency services in assisting them to provide emergency information to viewers.

**Contact details**

Thank you for providing Free TV with the opportunity to participate in this Inquiry.

Yours sincerely

**Julie Flynn**  
**CEO**

## **Document to be tabled: Coverage of recent emergencies by commercial free-to-air television broadcasters**

### **General issues around recent FTA network coverage of emergencies**

#### **Important role of networks in provision of information to residents**

- Commercial free-to-air television broadcasters all agree that the recent Queensland disasters were a great example of how networks can work productively with state and emergency services to deliver important information to affected persons.
- The regular, well organised media conferences conducted by the government and state emergency services were essential in the provision of information to the public by the commercial free-to-air television networks. Each of the commercial free-to-air television channels broke into regular programming to provide live coverage of the press briefings conducted by the Queensland Premier and emergency services, to ensure that residents had the most current information available.

#### **Local coverage**

- An important part of the commercial free-to-air television networks' coverage of the Queensland natural disasters was the delivery of news and information to communities at a local level, enabled by the networks' infrastructure and presence in regional centres.
- For example, during Cyclone Yasi the Seven Network provided extended local news services to residents of affected towns such as Rockhampton. While these local newsrooms normally only operate on a Monday to Friday basis, the staff at these newsrooms worked extra hours to provide bulletins over the weekend and special news services in recognition of the emergency. In addition to providing residents with relevant news, these extended bulletins were delivered in a public information format, carrying content such as unedited interviews with the Mayor of Rockhampton and information and advice from members of the state emergency service.
- Similarly, Network Ten sent reporters and crews out to stay in regional areas which were directly affected. Almost an entire newsroom was relocated up north to cover the arrival of Cyclone Yasi.

#### **Raising of awareness and contributions to relief efforts**

- The extensive level of media coverage of recent Australian disasters has generally been credited with the enormous support given by Australians to the various appeals for survivors and affected persons. The networks played a vital role in publicising the difficulties faced by the victims of these natural disasters, resulting in national awareness and subsequent financial and other contributions to the relief effort.
- All the networks made repeated references to the relevant official appeals as part of their extended coverage, and provided information on how to donate.
- On 12 February, the Nine Network held a telethon to benefit the victims of the bushfires, through the Australian Red Cross. *Australia Unites - The Victorian Bushfire Appeal*, raising about A\$20.5 million. The Nine Network ran a similar relief appeal in place of its regular prime time programming on Sunday 9 January 2011. The *Flood Relief Appeal – Australia Unites* raised over \$10 million towards the Disaster Relief Appeal for persons affected by the Queensland floods (those affected by Cyclone Yasi, which occurred later, also benefited from this appeal).
- This commitment to assisting residents in rebuilding their lives has not been abandoned now that the immediate crises have abated. For example, in recent months the Network Ten

news service in Brisbane has been following up distribution of Disaster Relief Appeal funds and holding the Distribution Committee to account.

### **Case studies/specific examples**

#### **Victorian Fires - 7 February 2009**

##### ***Nine Network***

- This was a difficult emergency to cover because it was not anticipated and the extent of the crises was not immediately known. Coverage was generally of the aftermath, rather than the emergency itself.
- On the night of the fires, the Nine Network commenced coverage with a 15 minute news bulletin on the fires at 9 pm. A one hour news special was aired on Sunday night following the fires, and then from Monday Nine provided significant ongoing coverage. The Today Show was extended to 11 am for the week following the fires, with regular news updates throughout the day. Evening news bulletins were extended to one hour, with an additional hour of coverage for each of the four nights following the disaster. Significant coverage was provided for about 2 weeks following the disaster.
- All of the resources from GTV were made available for the coverage, as well as additional resources from other Nine Network affiliates. At the height of the coverage there were between 50 and 70 people on the ground in Victoria, including journalists and crew.
- Coverage included footage of areas damaged or destroyed by fire, allowing survivors to tell their story, and repeated references to the Red Cross Appeal.
- During the coverage of the bushfire aftermath, reporter Simon Bouda and his crew used a Nine Network news helicopter to reunite a couple who had been separated by the fires and ended up on opposite sides of a mountain.

#### **Queensland Floods - Dec 2010 to Jan 2011**

##### ***Network Ten***

- Network Ten provided rolling coverage of the events on dates of critical events (such as 13 January), with regular news updates. Significant coverage was provided from then on, including extended news bulletins in affected areas lasting approximately two hours. These extended bulletins focused on the provision of information to the public. They contained interviews with and advice from the state emergency services, graphics of affected areas, provision of emergency or assistance phone numbers, and recapping the emergency services briefings.
- Most people in the Network Ten newsroom were working 13 hour days, with staff coming from other stations all around the country. One particular day in a news bulletin, there were 42 stories (up from an ordinary day of 12 or so).
- Journalists and crews were dispatched throughout the regions to cover particular areas hit by the disaster. Network Ten had at least 100 people on the ground throughout Queensland at the height of the crisis.

##### ***Nine Network***

- The Nine Network had approximately 100 people deployed in Queensland to cover the emergencies. A normal news day for Nine contains approximately 7.5 hours of news and

current affairs. Over the three days of major flooding, Nine showed 19 hours on the first day, 17.45 hours on the second and 13.20 hours on the third, with two days of extended news coverage thereafter.

- Nine had similar figures for their Cyclone Yasi coverage, mobilising approximately 70 people and running 13 hours of coverage on the day after the Cyclone hit the Queensland coast.

### **Cyclone Yasi - 1 February 2011 onwards**

#### ***Seven Network***

- The Seven Network provided continuous rolling coverage, commencing on the day before Cyclone Yasi was due to reach the Queensland coast. Several high profile journalists (such as the Sunrise crew) were sent to report live from the Cyclone zone.
- The Seven Network used their local infrastructure based in Maroochydore to anchor their coverage, drawing on the existing local knowledge of far north Queensland. The local office linked in closely with the crews and journalists from metropolitan offices who arrived to cover the story. All the links were done from the DVN (Digital Video Network) bearer in Maroochydore, which was removed enough to be protected from the damaging effects of the Cyclone.
- All of the twenty four staff in the far north Queensland offices were out or on call throughout the period, as well as a large number of people sent from metropolitan news rooms.