

LOCAL GOVERNMENT  
ASSOCIATION  
OF QUEENSLAND LTD.

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21 April 2011

Committee Secretary  
Senate Standing Committees on Environment and Communications  
PO Box 6100  
Parliament House  
Canberra ACT 2600  
Australia



Dear Secretary,

The Local Government Association of Queensland (LGAQ) welcomes the Environment and Communications References Committee's Inquiry into emergency communications. This is very timely considering the extraordinary and unprecedented flooding events, coupled with Cyclone Yasi, that Queensland has suffered from December 2010.

The LGAQ would like to offer some general comments and observations, and we have also made reference to these in our submissions to the Queensland Floods Commission of Inquiry.

In some flash flooding events, such as what was experienced in Toowoomba and Murphy's Creek in January 2011, it is doubtful if any enhanced system of early warning could have mitigated impacts. In some cases, warning of flash flooding could have placed more people in jeopardy as they tried to move cars that were very quickly washed away by the flash event.

There needs to be greater recognition that normal communication systems (fixed lines and mobile phones) may not operate in flood situations. Redundancies need to be considered in maintaining emergency communication. Two-way radios are important and there may be a role for satellite phones in some locations.

Emergency Alert systems (SMS message or voice message on fixed phone) are important in increasing awareness of potential events. There is no system at present that alerts those with a mobile phone who are visiting an area of potential threats. It is understood there is a COAG sponsored project to test the feasibility of location based SMS messages to all mobile phones in an area. The technology should be available to allow messages to be sent to any mobile phone logged on to a tower in a defined area.

In some cases, a warning siren in a small town may be the most appropriate method to alert people to a potential threat. However, it will be important that the siren does not confuse people in terms of the nature of the event (e.g. fire, cyclone and flood).

There needs to be recognition that in some locations there is effectively no "local" radio or television station. Residents may listen to broadcasts from a number of surrounding regions. It should be possible to ensure that warnings for each local area are provided to media in locations where residents of an adjoining area may be tuned in.

Enhanced use of technology to provide a better on-the-ground understanding of the magnitude of each event and potentially affected properties could assist in developing better community understanding of terminology and technical references to flood heights.

An emphasis on capacity building at the local level in interpreting and communicating flood and other disaster impacts is desirable.

The sheer volume of calls and hits on websites such as the SES and Main Roads resulted in delayed responses and diminished performance at times during recent events.

Specific comments and suggestions for enhancement include:

- 1) Clearer alert and warning messages for the public about the implication and timing of rising river/creek levels and an approaching cyclone and storm surge should be developed. Explanation of technical weather forecasting and hydrological terminology in “everyday” language and locally known references would be of great value to the community. Multi-lingual alerts and messages need to be made available in a timely manner, and distributed appropriately to people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.
- 2) Greater emphasis should be placed on capacity building at the local level in matters such as the interpretation and communication of potential event impacts, including enhanced technology to assist communication.
- 3) Review should be undertaken of the form and use of the emergency alert siren used on radio. Suggestions have been made for the adoption of a flood warning signal or siren.
- 4) Greater use of all forms of technology and communication should be explored in the dissemination of information, alert and warning messages e.g. radio, television, landline messaging and mobile telephones SMS (including phones without a billing address in the affected area), and web based - email, Facebook, twitter, etc. There is a need for protocols on the use of Facebook and other social media so that inaccurate and malicious information is not posted on sites and that those responsible for any false information can be dealt with by the courts.
- 5) Greater use should be made of commercial radio to convey public information, alert and warning messages to ensure a wider coverage across the various demographics reflecting diverse listening preferences. There should be recognition of radio and media coverage from neighbouring regions in dissemination of information.
- 6) Ongoing public information and education, particularly at the commencement of the wet season, is required to ensure the community is aware of its vulnerability to natural disasters, personal responsibilities should an event occur and the various means by which information can be accessed.
- 7) Local governments and LDMGs (Local Disaster Management Groups) should develop improved plans for the management and support of the media pre and post disaster events to ensure essential and accurate information is disseminated and to reassure the community that local leadership structures are operating effectively. The community looks to its local leaders.
- 8) Councils should consider the development/adoption of greater redundancy in their Call Centre operations and ICT systems to ensure continued operation during and immediately after disaster events through the establishment of back up systems outside of the city/town or region away from affected areas.

- 9) Alternative field communications should be developed to support on-the-ground LDMG and DDMG (District Disaster Management Group) response and recovery operations to overcome the loss of mobile phone or radio networks through damage to transmission facilities and loss of power. This is essential to public safety. Strategies should include provision of information through outreach, such as door knocking and hand delivered information.
- 10) The way in which the SES 132500 number operates to ensure a streamlined approach to the interaction between the State call centre and district and local SES operations should be reviewed. In recent events, some Queensland councils have reported instances of delays in transmitting requests for assistance to a local SES.

Kind regards,

Greg Hoffman PSM  
GENERAL MANAGER - ADVOCATE