

RE: Senate committee inquiry into the capacity of communication networks and emergency warning systems to deal with emergencies and natural disasters --NEWS Alert Failure during Canberra toxic fire on 16th Sep2011.

I refer to our submission to your Inquiry and now, the recent unfortunate experiences in the ACT with News Alert in response to a toxic fire in Canberra on 16th Sep 2011.

On 29th Sep 2011, the ACT Minister for Police and Emergency Services, Simon Corbell, said a report into Emergency Alert telephone warnings distributed during the recent Mitchell chemical fire highlights the limitations of the system.

"The national Emergency Alert telephone warnings system was used by the ACT to issue to warnings during the Mitchell chemical fire on 16 September. The report, which I have released today, has found there are some limitations when using Emergency Alert," Mr Corbell said.

"The first message at 1:38am was targeted to Mitchell to advise of fire and subsequent implementation of an exclusion zone around the suburb. The second message at 3:19am was intended to be sent to people within a 10 kilometre zone of the fire identified as within a shelter zone.

"Unfortunately, the second Emergency Alert message did not reach a number of people within the intended area. This is because it would have taken six to seven hours for the system to deliver the message to all phones within the zone.

"The ACT ESA has advised that Emergency Alert will be best used in the future for sending targeted messages to small areas rather than for large scale use as was done on 16 September where time is a critical factor."

Mr Corbell said that he would be writing to the Federal Attorney-General, Robert McClelland, to raise the issue of the system's limitations and will also raise the issue at the Standing Council on Police and Emergency Management in November.

The report has made five recommendations around additional training, review of procedures including quality assurance processes, better utilisation of system functionalities within limitations and provide written advice to the system administrators and national governance bodies about the ACT experience with recommended enhancements.

"The report reinforces that Emergency Alert is just one of many options available to emergency controllers to issue community warnings and is not always suitable for use in all circumstances. The more traditional methods, through local media outlets and the ESA website, and the newly utilised ESA Twitter account, proved extremely successful during the Mitchell chemical fire.

"The ESA issued 37 alerts and updates via ESA website and through local media outlets between Friday 16 September and Sunday 18 September on the fire. During this time the website recorded 64,963 visits with a total of 127, 285 page views. The ESA also posted 107 tweets on the ESA Twitter account @ACT_ESA and has gone from having 15 followers to over 1900.

"I encourage people to use these sources for keeping up to date during emergencies in the future, whether it is a day to day emergency incident or a major emergency situation."

Given these major failings in News Alert, especially its limited capacity to deliver an urgent message immediately, we feel the Committee should consider this as a critical priority in examining the capacity of existing communication networks. The recent ACT experience could have been catastrophic if the plume was actually toxic-how would the message have got through?

What would this mean in terms of impact on the emergency communications system capacity, capability could have developed into a huge disaster when significant numbers of persons needed to be relocated quickly, medical treatment provided, and above all the task of handling thousands of displaced persons (especially children) would-be overwhelming?. It's a relief that the ACT fire didn't result in a coronial investigation but this may have been an outcome if for instance it related to non receipt of messaging or failure in delivery.

We offered to demonstrate to the Committee, the YellowBird Automatic Linking to Emergency Radio Transmission (ALERT) radio system. The simplicity of YellowBird enables the ability to set a risk polygon of areas affected by any disaster with direct targeting of specific messaging via GPS integration and automatic activation of radio (any frequency) including the radio component of an I-phone. It is a means of enhancing existing arrangements, and deserves consideration by Government, especially in the light of the recent problems experienced with News Alert in the ACT.

We need to have a reliable communications/messaging system which can be provided at no cost, consistent messaging in the critical phases of response and recovery.

Information to the community about the ACT toxic fire and its aftermath was through ABC Radio 666 which was totally reliant on systems and people to engage emergency management authorities and then relay the messages etc. What would have been the situation if there had been a total loss of power—what that would mean re-receiving messaging and overload etc is something which is fundamentally ignored or avoided in discussion about News Alert. On top of that who pays for the News Alert messages which can be a large operational cost of using the News Alert system.

There have been four inquiries this year (QLD Floods, WA Fires, Vic Floods and the Senate Committee on emergency communications) all of which have raised and pointed to the need to improve the adequacy of existing warning systems and arrangements, and still we have no indication of a willingness to consider alternatives which would enhance national emergency warning capability.

We trust that the Senate Inquiry into communication networks and emergency warning systems will also consider the recent ACT experience and difficulties with News Alert. It would be very disappointing to see the Committee's report materialise which does not address major failings of News Alert as indicated by Minister Corbell and the ACT Emergency Services Agency (ESA) Report of 29th Sep 2011—see below.

We also noted Senator Gary Humphries' concerns (which he expressed publicly) about the inadequacies of News Alert following Minister Corbell's press release and ESA report into the ACT fire--we have copied Senator Humphries into this note.

YellowBird is available to brief and demonstrate the system to the Committee.

Kind regards
David Templeman and Stephen Robson