



**Minister for Emergency Services; Innovation and the Digital Economy; Science;
Medical Research; Minister Assisting the Minister for State and Industry
Development, Jobs and Trade
Deputy Leader of the Government in the Legislative Council**

Our Ref: 62-37210

Committee Secretary
Senate Standing Committees on Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600
rrat.sen@aph.gov.au

Dear Committee Secretary

Thank you for the opportunity to provide feedback as part of the Inquiry into the shutdown of the 3G mobile network and telecommunications services accessibility, and its impact on the community and emergency response.

The Department of Fire and Emergency Services (DFES) has advised that the shutdown of the 3G network may affect the ability of some community members to contact Triple Zero in emergencies if they have not upgraded their personal devices. Unfortunately, DFES does not have the data to estimate how many people will be affected but acknowledge the major telecommunications carriers and media have a major part to play in reducing the impact through awareness campaigns. I understand that the 3G shutdown may also affect some rural and regional areas, however it is my expectation that the telecommunication providers will ensure no coverage is lost to these areas.

I have been advised that DFES has upgraded its devices to 4G and has backup technologies in place to prepare for the 3G shutdown. DFES is also educating its staff and volunteers, providing suitable 4G replacement devices and a cache of compatible mobile devices for large deployments in the event of an emergency. The statewide project to upgrade automated vehicle location (AVL) is well underway with 78 per cent replaced. Those devices not upgraded in time will default to satellite connection, so data connectivity will not be lost.

I have attached my submission to the Inquiry for your consideration. Should the Committee require any further information please do not hesitate to contact my Principal Policy Advisor, Mathew Dixon, at mathewdixon@dpc.wa.gov.au or on 08 6552 6723.

Yours sincerely

Hon Stephen Dawson MLC
MINISTER FOR EMERGENCY SERVICES

05 JUN 2024

SUBMISSION

On 26 March 2024, the Senate referred an Inquiry into the shutdown of the 3G mobile network and telecommunications services accessibility to the Senate Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport References Committee to report back on by 30 November 2024. Please find below the Department of Fire and Emergency Services (DFES) response.

DFES is the Western Australian government agency responsible for coordinating emergency services for various natural hazards and emergency incidents, including fires, floods, storms, earthquakes, and other large-scale emergencies. DFES works to protect the community by providing emergency response, prevention, preparedness, and recovery services. As part of the portfolio of services, DFES hosts Triple Zero (000), the National Emergency Telephone Service used by the community to seek emergency assistance from police, fire or ambulance services.

The terms of reference of the inquiry requests feedback re impact to the accessibility for the community to utilise emergency management services if the 3G network is shut down, with particular reference to the following areas:

(a) the impact on access to triple zero emergency calls:

The ability of community members to call the triple zero emergency service from their mobile device, after the 3G network is shut down, will depend on their mobile handset device being 4G or 5G compatible. From a community awareness perspective, the telecommunications industry had announced publicly in 2019 that the 3G network will be shut down in 2024, and the community and businesses have had five (5) years to replace/upgrade their mobile devices. Vodafone switched off their 3G network in January 2024, Telstra will end services in August 2024 and Optus in September 2024 this year.

DFES has prepared the triple zero platform for the changeover by upgrading key mobile infrastructure to 4G. The platform only falls back to mobile telephony if a disaster recovery event happens where it is hosted. All of the DFES mobile phones associated with triple zero have been checked and there is no reliance on 3G in that infrastructure.

To assist with raising awareness in the community and workforce, DFES is conducting an awareness program to ensure both staff and volunteer workforce have upgraded devices. With over 26,000 volunteers providing emergency services across 2.5 million square kilometres of land mass, both communicating with, and replacement of devices is a lengthy, though rewarding process.

(b) the number of devices and customers affected by the shutdown:

DFES is unable to determine the exact number of devices and customers impacted by the upcoming 3G network shutdown and while the media will speculate, DFES does not collect any data that would enable it to provide guidance. Even given the media campaigns, it is possible members of the public may be unaware that their mobile phones may no longer work after September 2024. DFES has concerns that this contingent of the community may be unable to contact emergency response when needed.

(c) the absence of 4G services in rural/regional areas previously covered by 3G:

The provision of 4G services in rural and regional areas is a function of the telecommunications carriers servicing those areas. It is DFES's expectation that these suppliers verify that there will be no degradation of coverage related to the 3G shutdown and include it as part of their consumer awareness campaigns.

(d) the impact on elderly and health-compromised Australians who use medical alert devices on the 3G network:

Other government agencies may store data related to medical alert devices, though this is not part of the DFES mandate.

(e) the impact on industries that use 3G devices:

Other government agencies may store data related to industry use of 3G devices, though this is not part of the DFES mandate.

(f) the impact of a lack of telecommunications services on the economic and social circumstances of those who live in regional Australia:

Other government agencies may store data related to the economic and social circumstances of the community, though this is not part of the DFES mandate.

(g) service provisions and coverage:

To reduce reliance of service provision on cellular (mobile) connections, DFES has expanded its connectivity infrastructure to include two-way satellite-based services as well as low earth orbit (LEO) technology. These portable technologies provide for mobile coverage on response vehicles for incident personnel as well as community use, enabling services to community to continue even during emergency scenarios.

The automated vehicle locators (AVLs) installed in vehicles or of the portable variety are also being upgraded from 3G to 4G. Given the breadth of the West Australian state and the distributed emergency service workforce, the upgrade program of some 2126 vehicles is still underway, with 78 per cent of the fleet being upgraded to 4G connectivity. The AVL technology allows for an alternate path to mobile connection and allows the use of satellite communications. This will mean that the devices will continue to send location data albeit at a slower rate, even if they are not upgraded to 4G.

(h) efficacy and capability in disaster situations;

Despite best efforts to prepare for disaster situations, DFES acknowledges that some devices may be missed during the process of replacing 3G devices. To reduce risk, DFES has a cache of replacement 4G devices that will be available to deploy rapidly as part of any large-scale emergency event. These devices will include mobile phones and cellular modems.

- (i) adherence to, adequacy of, and opportunity to improve service obligations; and**
- (j) any other related matters.**

As noted in **(g)**, DFES is committed to improving its emergency services through the use of value for money, highly portable, and scalable technologies. DFES consults widely and works with other partner agencies to improve service provision to the community.