

Commercial Radio Australia

Answers to questions taken on notice

1. You noted in your submission that sometimes commercial stations have difficulty in accessing information from emergency service providers. Is this because the emergency service providers prioritise to whom they issue the relevant information? e.g. to the ABC

This has been the case in the past before we made a concerted effort to address the problem. It is improving. Overall, it is difficult for us to know *why* the commercial radio industry has not always receive prompt and comprehensive information from emergency service organizations, particularly when compared with the information received by the ABC. However, it is clear that this was a problem frequently encountered by local commercial radio stations during the emergencies of 2011. For example:

- One of our members in Queensland was told by the emergency services departments to go to the ABC website for up to date information. When the station in question did so, the ABC's site was not up to date. Clearly, this is not an efficient means of communicating to the public, particularly when 80% of the public listens to commercial radio. Nor does it reflect the fact that both the commercial and public service broadcasters are official emergency broadcasters and should be given access to the same information.
- On 11 January 2011, 4BC became aware that the alert siren was being used when a listener called in to say it had heard the siren on the ABC station. No representative from Emergency Management Queensland (EMQ) had contacted 4BC to inform it that the alert siren should be played. 4BC contacted EMQ, who said that they should play the alert siren. Again, this is an inefficient means of communicating to the majority who listen to commercial radio. It is also confusing for listeners who switch between stations.

Part of the problem was that politicians frequently omitted to mention that commercial radio stations were official emergency broadcasters. This may have encouraged emergency services organizations to provide information only to the ABC. For example:

- At a press conference on 2 February at EMQ Kedron headquarters, Premier Bligh stated that the ABC is the Queensland official emergency services broadcasters. No mention was made of commercial broadcasters, even though the Queensland government has an official MoU with the commercial radio industry, and 4BC had a journalist permanently stationed at EMQ Kedron reporting to 4KZ and 4AM.
- Councillor Shayne Sutton, Brisbane City Council Opposition Leader, Spokesperson for Infrastructure and Councillor for Morningside sent an email on 11 January 2011, advising people to listen to ABC radio for the most up to date information. No mention was made of commercial radio. Councillor Sutton remedied this oversight in her next communication.

We suggest that the following steps would aid the efficient communication of emergency information:

- (a) emergency services organizations should provide the same information to commercial broadcasters and the ABC. This will recognize the equal footing of both broadcasters and will ensure that information reaches as many people as possible. Further, it will avoid causing public confusion as a result of having different information on different stations; and**
- (b) all public figures, particularly politicians, should be aware that the commercial radio industry has signed MoUs with the State governments. Under the terms of the MoUs, commercial radio stations are official emergency services broadcasters and should be referred to as such in all public communications;**

2. What do you perceive as the role of commercial radio in providing timely emergency warning advice to the public? Is it to provide detailed information or to direct the public to appropriate information sources?

The role of the commercial radio industry is key due to the massive listener base. The role will vary depending on the situation and stage of disaster and includes the following objectives:

- **To provide as much detailed information as possible to the public.** This includes local information communicated by listeners as well as information distributed by the emergency services organizations. For example, on 10 January 2011, the official BOM forecasts and satellite screen did not show exceptional weather for Toowoomba. However, as a result of local listener calls, River 949 was able to report on rising water at Withcott, flash flooding in Toowoomba and rising water over the Warrego Highway.
- **To direct the public to appropriate information sources.** Commercial stations spend a significant amount of time directing listeners to information sources. They provide contact details, websites and physical addresses for information hotlines and centres offering assistance. For example:
 - B105 and Triple M broadcast regular segments with practical information, such as evacuation points, phone contacts and emergency health advice.
 - Brisbane digital station 4TAB(2) provided a 'loop' service with points of contact, phone and web addresses relevant to those affected by the floods.
 - In some cases, radio stations acted as the information source where listeners were unable to contact emergency services' information hotlines. For example, callers to B105 and Triple M in Brisbane reported that they were having trouble reaching the SES on their hotline, so B105 and Triple M provided the SES information directly to callers.

- **To provide support and a sense of community to the public.** In addition to providing practical information, commercial radio broadcasts help to keep people calm by fostering a sense of community and reducing social isolation. This is shown by the huge number of local calls taken by stations during the crises and by the reactions of communities following the emergencies. For example:
 - One 4KZ listener wrote to the Cairns Weekend Post to say that *“all through that dreadful night [the 4KZ radio announcers] remained with us, calmly giving updates and playing great music. It was comforting to know they were out there, putting their own lives at risk for our community”*.
 - Craig Wallace MP reported in Parliament that 4TO *“were our only link to the outside world ... they broadcast all through that dark night and shared phone calls and SMS messages from locals who were also bunkered down in their homes, in bathrooms, hallways and cupboards right across the north from Hinchinbrook to Bowen”*.
- **To assist the public in preparing for emergency events.** Commercial radio stations also assist in preparing the public for predicted emergency events. For example:
 - In October 2010, following long range adverse weather predictions, River949 arranged a full schedule of announcements – at no charge – seeking additional volunteers for the SES.
 - In November 2010, River 9449 negotiated with a large electrical retailer to sell battery operated radios to the public for \$10 each. A community service campaign, provided at no cost, alerted listeners to this offer.

3. Do you consider that local commercial radio can provide better information than the local ABC station? If so, why do you think this is so?

Local commercial stations have the majority of the audience and in fact there are many more local commercial radio stations than truly local ABC services. However, both local commercial radio stations and local ABC stations both have a key role and complement each other.

In order to maximize the value that each has, in communicating with local communities, both must be given the same information from emergency services organizations, and both must be publicly described as official emergency services broadcasters. This will maximize the distribution of emergency information and will ensure that the public receives consistent information from all media sources.