

Senate Standing Committee on Environment and Communications

The capacity of communication networks and emergency warning systems to deal with emergencies and natural disasters

**Submission from:- Trevor Williams
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**Submission authorised by:- Cr. Lyn McLaughlin
Chairman
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I have concerns about the reliability of the mobile phone network and land-line phone network for small communities during disasters. For example, in the recent Cyclone Yasi, many of our smaller communities lost telephone access because the Telstra substations lost power and had insufficient battery backup or no emergency generator power. Mobile phone towers also had similar problems. The small communities also rely on the mobile phone network to provide internet access, and as a result of the failure of the mobile phone network, these communities had no internet access. The communities of Millaroo and Dalbeg had no communications for almost 1 week after Cyclone Yasi. As a result of this, the Millaroo State School remained closed during this period.

The Burdekin Shire LDMG uses the community radio station Radio 97.1 Sweet FM to broadcast information during emergencies. However, the current broadcast license for Radio 97.1 Sweet FM restricts broadcasting to approximately 25km from the transmission tower. This restriction prevents Radio 97.1 Sweet FM from reaching the outlying areas of the Burdekin Shire, especially the Giru, Millaroo and Dalbeg areas. (Cr. McLaughlin has previously written about this issue to the Honourable Stephen Conroy, Minister for Broadband, Communications and the Digital Economy, in March 2010. Cr. McLaughlin also met with Honourable Stephen Conroy in June 2010).

Other concerns about issuing Early Warning Messages through the mobile phone network (via SMS) are the delay in receiving the message, and people's ability to hear the message arrive in the middle of the night. During previous natural disasters (or natural disaster warnings in the case of Tsunami), the mobile phone network has jammed for hours. No-one has been able to access either a mobile phone call or a sms. In Cyclone Yasi, some residents of the Burdekin Shire received a sms warning about storm tide, even though they live in areas not vulnerable to storm tide inundation. It is believed that these residents' phone bills are mailed to a post code that is partially affected by storm tide inundation, but the early warning network used to send the sms could not distinguish between residential addresses and postal addresses.

Burdekin Shire council previously submitted a funding application under the Natural Disaster Resilience Program, to purchase 'Meerkat' - an early warning system triggered through a pulse in the power system to a device in the home, similar to a smoke alarm. I still believe this system has great merit for communities vulnerable to sudden disasters such as tsunami or flash flooding. I also believe that legislation should be enacted to make it compulsory for homes located in tsunami prone areas to have a meerkat alarm installed.

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