

POLICE FEDERATION OF AUSTRALIA

INQUIRY INTO EMERGENCY COMMUNICATIONS

RESPONSE TO QUESTIONS ON NOTICE FROM SENATORS

1. **Senator HUMPHRIES:** *We are not hearing on either of these days from any emergency service organisations in Victoria. You talk in your submission about the problems that arose out of Black Saturday in Victoria: the exchanges being knocked out, the mobile towers being inoperable and so on. Can you give us any examples with respect to policing of what was not possible to achieve because of that failure of infrastructure in Victoria?*

Mr Burgess: I cannot do that here this morning. I would be happy to take some of those questions on notice. But I do note that you have AFAC appearing before you tomorrow—the Australian Fire Authorities Council is appearing tomorrow morning. I think they would be able to assist you with some of that.

Senator HUMPHRIES: *Yes, that is right. They will presumably tell us about fire operations. Could you take on notice the question of what handicaps resulted for the police in Victoria due to that failure of infrastructure? That would be a useful bit of information to slot into our inquiry.*

Mr Burgess: Yes.

ANSWER

The **2009 Black Saturday Bushfires Royal Commission Final Report** had this to say about police communications:

'Communications systems on 7 February were also hindered by poor coverage, lack of interoperability between emergency services agencies, and insufficient investment in new technologies. For example, the transmission speed of the paging system had been reduced in order to expand reception coverage, and this caused serious delays in other than the most urgent messaging. There were also communication difficulties between metropolitan and regional police because of incompatible radio systems. Further, radio 'black spots' meant that reception was poor or non-existent in some areas, and there was channel congestion and insufficient channel availability. These problems were exacerbated when fire damaged or destroyed radio and telecommunications infrastructure.' (page 11)

In relation to communications systems problems confronting Victoria Police on 7 February 2009, the Royal Commission Report said:

'Police in metropolitan Melbourne use the Metropolitan Mobile Radio digital network. It suits their operational requirements better than the StateNet Mobile Radio analogue network because it facilitates encrypted communications and 'private chat' channels. The SMR network is still used by rural and regional police because MMR has no coverage outside the metropolitan area.¹⁶⁷ Police also use the Mobile Data Network managed by ESTA. This network enables data to be directly downloaded to terminals in police vehicles from the Victoria Police law enforcement and ESTA call-taking and dispatch databases.¹⁶⁸

The Commission heard evidence of communications difficulties because the MMR and SMR networks are not intra-operable. On the metropolitan fringe police vehicles are equipped with radios for both the analogue and digital networks, and officers are trained to operate both systems. Metropolitan police members deployed to rural areas on 7 February were, however, often without a means of

communication. Some police had vehicles with only digital equipment. Even when they were given a radio compatible with the rural SMR network, many did not know how to operate it. Similarly, rural police deployed to urban areas serviced by the MMR network did not have radio coverage or where there was coverage it was often intermittent and prone to frequent drop-outs.¹⁶⁹ A further communications problem experienced by some police was congestion on regional D24 dispatch channels: this occurred during the Redesdale, Bendigo and Murrindindi fires.¹⁷⁰

The Strategic Framework discussed in the following paragraphs aims to rectify these difficulties. In the interim, Victoria Police will need to ensure its members are provided with radio handsets compatible with the network for the area to which they are deployed. Appropriate training—as well as back-up communications systems such as mobile phones and CFA radios—is also required.’ (page 130)

As a result of the experience during the bushfires, Victoria is reported working on a new *Emergency Services Communications Strategic Framework* which has six priorities:

- seamless statewide communication
- call taking and dispatch
- consistent statewide quality of service
- improved data services and
- community communication (page 11).

2. **Senator BACK:** *On the issue of 800- versus 700-megahertz spectrum, are you aware of any differences in the geographical spread—the capacity for geographical spread across Australia, particularly remote areas. Are you aware of any difference between 700 and 800 megahertz in that regard?*

Mr Burgess: I am not, except that, as we understand it, the 800 already has about 88 per cent or thereabouts. It is occupied by the key telcos. So I would expect that it probably has national coverage, but I could not tell you exactly.

Senator BACK: *You have no idea of whether there are any security differences between the two, but you will take that on notice?*

Mr Burgess: Yes.

ANSWER

The PFA is not aware of any difference between to 700 MHz and 800 MHz spectrum when it comes to geographic reach or security and we have not claimed that there is any difference.

3. **Senator BACK:** *I just want to follow up the technology questions which have been asked by Senators McKenzie and Humphries. Do you know of any radio technology which is actually now produced in Australia? I am speaking now of hand-held radios and base station radio. Do you know of any that are actually now built in Australia or do we source everything from overseas?*

Mr Burgess: I do not know. I know that a lot of the police communications equipment is sourced through companies such as Motorola. But, again, I could not tell you exactly. We can try to find that information for you—whether they actually build it here in Australia or source it from overseas. I am not sure.

Senator BACK: *I would appreciate it if you could take that on notice.*

ANSWER

The PFA is advised that there are no radio handsets used by Australian police or emergency services manufactured in Australia. All are manufactured overseas.