

Responding responsibly: the role of radio in emergency situations

Community expectations

- 4.1 Radio plays a vital role in disseminating information to regional communities in times of real or threatened emergencies. While all broadcasting and communications media should play a critical role in these times, the portability of radio and its capacity to speedily reach large sections of the community place it in a position of primary importance. This view is clearly evident in the following extracts from submissions to this inquiry from the Bureau of Meteorology and the New South Wales State Emergency Service.

Radio is generally the most appropriate media for the broadcasting/dissemination of meteorological and related information (severe weather warnings, general forecasts, flood warnings, river heights, etc.) provided by the Bureau's forecasting and warning services. This is because people listen to the radio during the daytime when driving, working around the home, even while "surfing" the Internet and sometimes at the office or while shopping. While television enables greater amounts of information to be broadcast, at the present time it is not as quick as radio to respond to the Bureau's information. Also, with the possible exception of the early evening hours, radio reaches more people at risk to meteorological events. Radio is the only mass dissemination medium possible for warnings with short lead times (such as severe thunderstorm warnings). Furthermore, radios can be cheap, portable, readily available and run by batteries which can be stored for emergency situations. This makes it potentially, the only communication mechanism available in times when the

power is out and telephones are crowded. Radio plays a critically important role during severe events (cyclones, floods, thunderstorms etc), not only in terms of dissemination, but also in community education through recorded interviews and live-crosses with/to Bureau staff. Radio time is much easier to access during such events when compared to television. This is considered to provide significant social benefit (public safety etc).¹

For many years, broadcast radio has been the primary means by which flood warnings, flood information and flood advice have been transmitted to communities which are about to experience flooding or are already suffering from it. While there are many other means of disseminating information prior to and during floods, none has the capacity to reach such a large number of people simultaneously and repetitively with substantial amounts of information...none is as central to the dissemination of urgent information under emergency conditions as is broadcast radio.²

- 4.2 Over the years a community expectation has grown that radio will be there to guide people in emergency or other such situations. The performance of radio in these times and the impact that networking has had on that performance is one of the most serious issues that has been raised in this inquiry.
- 4.3 As with the evidence concerning local radio services generally, the evidence about the performance of radio services in emergency situations was quite mixed.

The performance of broadcasters

- 4.4 In their submissions to the inquiry, broadcasters from all sectors conveyed an understanding of the importance of broadcasting emergency announcements. They described having adequate procedures in place and in many instances provided accounts of having played a vital role in relaying information during real or threatened crises. Despite these claims, some of which are reproduced below, we are not convinced that practice always matches the rhetoric.

1 Submission No 179, Vol 5, p 960-961 (Bureau of Meteorology)

2 Submission No 136, Vol 5, p 771 (NSW SES)

- 4.5 The ABC claimed to play a critical role in disseminating essential State Emergency Services information and in providing companionship to people in times of need.³
- 4.6 FARB claimed that the broadcasting of emergency announcements is accepted within the industry as an 'essential element in community relations and in providing a comprehensive service to listeners.'⁴
- 4.7 DMG Group explained how its stations retain the ability to respond on an immediate basis to emergency situations 'through the establishment of telephone hotlines and formal communications strategies with emergency services organisations, and through the ability of the hubs to produce and insert immediate disaster or emergency alerts into the programs broadcast from the hubs and, in extreme or urgent cases, through the ability of the local managers to disconnect hub programming at any stage and replace it with live broadcasting from the local studio'.⁵
- 4.8 Ace Radio Broadcasters claimed that it has and will always retain the ability and infrastructure required to have any emergency announcement on air literally within minutes at all times and that it regularly updates contacts and procedures and makes these available to police and emergency service and similar organisations.⁶
- 4.9 Bathurst Broadcasters gave the following account of its close relationship with the local emergency services organisations.

In Bathurst we have a local emergency management committee. They meet every two months. Their next meeting is on 20 February. I am the media liaison officer on that committee. There are representatives of SES, police, fire, ambulance, hospitals - you name it, they are all there. Basically there we look at the plans that are in place for emergency services in Bathurst. Exercises are scheduled where necessary so they can be carried out to make sure our routines work when they need to. We have a great relationship with the police and the SES here, so they just call when necessary. Our list of priority contacts is me first of all and our breakfast announcer on 2BS second of all, and one of our other announcers is the third priority. So they can get hold of us whenever they need to.

3 Submission No 108, Vol 3, p 460 (ABC)

4 Submission No 133.02, Vol 8, p 1974 (FARB)

5 Submission No 106.04, Vol 3, p 304 (DMG Group)

6 Submission No 175, Vol 5, p 932 (Ace Radio Broadcasters)

- 4.10 The Committee was presented with evidence that some stations go to considerable lengths to ensure communities have access to information in emergencies.

The value of the ABC's infrastructure and technical expertise during emergency situations was well demonstrated in Katherine in January 1998 when the town was submerged during floods and all means of communication were lost. ABC Radio staff and an NTA representative travelled to the site of the most powerful transmitter in the region and using portable broadcasting equipment were able to establish communication for the community. They conducted interviews over the UHF and HF radio with police and emergency services and kept flood bound victims company throughout the night.⁷

- 4.11 On occasion the determination to continue or re-establish broadcasts has involved staff putting their own safety at risk as illustrated in the following example.

A second incident occurred the following month during the height of the devastating floods that hit the far north coast. On this occasion it was Radio 97 at Murwillumbah which was put off the air, again due to transmitter problems. The local SES management was called on for assistance in ferrying the station's engineer across floodwaters in the middle of the night to the transmitter site so the station could be put back on air. However, the local SES command determined that the risk to volunteer personnel was too high in the circumstances that prevailed and agreed to attempt the crossing in daylight the next morning. The station engineer eventually managed to reach the site using his own vehicle at daybreak in what were still very dangerous circumstances and put the station back on air.⁸

- 4.12 There is some support for various claims made by broadcasters from emergency service organisations. Some of this was provided in evidence given directly to us as in the examples below.

The ABC, for example, is very good in terms of running our warning services. We have a system of priorities, particularly for tropical cyclone warnings, where we assign a top priority where life is threatened immediately. The ABC will break into television or radio regularly and broadcast those.⁹

7 Submission No 108, Vol 3, p 461 (ABC)

8 Submission No 133.02, Vol 8, p 1977 (FARB)

9 Transcript of evidence, 30 January 2001, Melbourne, p 117-118 (Bureau of Meteorology)

A good example is provided by the locally owned and operated station 2BS (Bathurst), which operated on a continuous basis broadcasting flood information during the severe event of August 1998. Hundreds of people had to evacuate as this flood rose and in a short period of time. The success of this operation was in no small measure due to the willing cooperation of the local radio station.¹⁰

- 4.13 Supporting evidence was also found in testimonials attached to submissions from the broadcasters themselves. For instance, attached to the submission from Grant Broadcasters were letters from the NSW Police Service, the Victorian SES and the CFA for the Barwon Corangamite area, all of which commended a local radio station for its role in emergency situations.¹¹
- 4.14 For all this, we were not convinced that all radio stations effectively support their communities in times of emergency. We had various reports, for instance, about the performance of the radio stations within the Broadcast Operations Group during the November 2000 floods in northern NSW and the January 2001 storms in Dubbo, NSW. However, we also received evidence about these same crises that pointed to other factors that affected the performance of the radio stations at these times including damage to equipment in one instance¹² and, in another, a misunderstanding between the Council and the station about access to the station when programs were being networked.¹³
- 4.15 The most persuasive evidence we received on this issue was from the various emergency service and related organisations. Although all such organisations that participated in this inquiry went to pains to commend the efforts made by many individual stations and networks, all described experiencing more difficulty in recent years in getting access to the air-waves in times of emergencies. All organisations traced this to the increase in networking. This concern was made clear in the following extracts from the submission from the NSW SES, the Bureau of Meteorology and the Country Fire Authority (CFA).

Recent trends in the operation of radio broadcasting in non-metropolitan New South Wales have serious consequences in terms of public safety during emergencies. 'Networking' has caused a reduction in the level of local access to the airwaves, and local emergency managers increasingly find it impossible to

10 Submission No 136, Vol 5, p 773 (NSW SES)

11 Submission No 187, Vol 5, p 1089, 1121 and 1127 (Grant Broadcasters)

12 Submission No 289, Vol 8, p 2122 (Western Broadcasters Pty Ltd)

13 Transcript of evidence, 31 January 2001, Tamworth, p 165 (Mr Lyon)

disseminate vital information to the community. As a result, lives are placed at risk and efforts to reduce property damage are diminished in their effectiveness.¹⁴

The Bureau has noticed that both its Regional Offices and State Emergency Services often experience difficulties at the local level in breaking into late transmissions on local station because they are networked from a remote locations.¹⁵

In our experience getting the vital information to the public via local radio is often difficult if not impossible because of networking of local radio stations or automation. This prevents the inclusion of live, localised information at short notice.¹⁶

- 4.16 According to the NSW SES, a key cause of the difficulties was the breakdown in the relationship between parties.

Networking has had a number of effects which go beyond mere changes in stations ownership and control. Probably these effects were not intended, but they have had the consequence of markedly reducing the quality of the promulgation of vital emergency information. This has occurred because the bond between emergency managers and radio stations personnel has been weakened. The changes apply to commercial radio and the Australian Broadcasting Corporation alike.¹⁷

- 4.17 Many of the problems related to the difficulty of contacting stations during networked or automated programming. Such difficulties were reported by the CFA, for example:

We have contacted stations asking, 'Are there numbers?' The numbers they give are either studio hotlines that ring out—I am not talking about very small country stations but, in particular, some of the regional centres; these lines just ring out even though they are supposed to be directly to the studio—or after-hours numbers. They give us new after-hours numbers or mobiles and often they just ring out.¹⁸

- 4.18 In its submission to the inquiry the CFA described trying to contact stations on two occasions in January 2001 when a Total Fire Ban was proclaimed.

14 Submission No 136, Vol 5, p 769 (NSW SES)

15 Submission No 179, Vol 5, p 960 (Bureau of Meteorology)

16 Submission No 240, Vol 7, p 1762 (Country Fire Authority)

17 Submission No 136, Vol 5, p 772 (NSW SES)

18 Transcript of evidence, 30 January 2001, Melbourne, p 116 (Mr Philp)

On the first occasion (New Year's Day) 15 commercial stations could not be raised and on 13 January, 12 stations could not be raised.¹⁹

- 4.19 The problem of stations being unattended while broadcasting networked or computer automated programming was exacerbated by the likelihood of station personnel being on leave from work, on weekends or even outside normal business hours. For instance, the NSW SES described having had some difficulty contacting 2VM in northern NSW, a station which was now extensively networked from 2SM. It added that 'given the small local staffs of stations such as this one, this situation arises frequently especially on weekends.'²⁰
- 4.20 The NSW SES also suggested that stations had less inclination to broadcast announcements for lesser events (for example, an impending flood) which were more frequent and less newsworthy. The reluctance to broadcast announcements until they had a high level of newsworthiness could lead, it claimed, to critical early information being missed.²¹
- 4.21 Also of concern was the degree to which the lack of familiarity with a region as demonstrated by mispronunciation of place names, etc, affected the integrity of announcements over the long term.

An example of the potential for poor communication relates to the pronunciation of local place names. Local announcers are almost always familiar with the way these names are pronounced, but outsiders often lack this familiarity and their broadcasts are likely to be confused and confusing as a result. In turn this reduces the credibility of the information being provided. Such outcomes do nothing to help people when floods are rising and may do longer-term damage as well.²²

Mutual responsibilities

- 4.22 The effective broadcast of information in emergency situations relies on clear communications between emergency organisations and broadcasters. Establishing and maintaining channels of communication is a two way process. That problems have arisen on occasion in getting announcements to air cannot be solely attributed to broadcasters. The mutual nature of the responsibility was acknowledged by the NSW SES.

19 Submission No 240, Vol 7, p 1762 (CFA)

20 Submission No 136, Vol 5, p 775 (NSW SES)

21 Submission No 136, Vol 5, p 773 (NSW SES)

22 Submission No 136, Vol 5, p 772 (NSW SES)

I think we, on the emergency management side of the house, need to ensure that the material we provide to the radio stations communicates well in a radio context – and sometimes, I have to say, it is not. Sometimes our flood bulletins are very long, they are not very radio friendly and they incorporate material which is perhaps best dealt with by other communication modes.²³

- 4.23 In describing evidence of problems developing in getting relevant announcements to air in emergency situations, the NSW SES was careful to put the extent of the problem in perspective and pointed out that the system often worked extremely well.
- 4.24 We acknowledge the community service commitment to informing and safeguarding their communities during situations where lives and/or property are put at risk by flood, storm, fire, cyclone or other circumstances. During these times, and in between these times, many managers and staff members commit time and effort to ensuring the community has access to the information that it needs and expects. As described above, there have been occasions when staff from both national and commercial broadcasters have demonstrated the commitment to their communities by contributing well beyond what would reasonably be considered the call of duty.
- 4.25 However, we do not think it is satisfactory that when FARB surveyed its members early on in this inquiry, the results revealed that only a majority of stations that responded to the survey could be contacted outside office hours or have standby transmitters and emergency power supplies to deal with emergencies.²⁴ This is not an area in which there is room for half hearted efforts on behalf of station operators. Whether enshrined in legislation or not, having control of any broadcast facility carries with it serious social responsibilities.
- 4.26 Technological developments should always lead to improved rather than diminished services. The ability to network programs or provide pre-recorded, automated programs should never have been allowed to interfere with the capacity of emergency service organisations to get information to air quickly and reliably. The core role of emergency service organisations is to protect the community and they need, and should have every reason to expect, the full co-operation of all broadcast services.

23 Transcript of evidence, 1 February 2001, Bathurst, p 287 (Dr Keys)

24 Submission No 133.02, Vol 8, p 1975 (FARB)

Proposed Code of Conduct

- 4.27 The conduct of this inquiry has prompted a number of rapid developments in relation to broadcasting in emergency situations, the most significant of which is the development of a draft code of conduct on the broadcast of emergency information.
- 4.28 In January 2001, following our hearings in December 2000, the ABA expressed its concern to FARB that 'there are no agreed minimum standards in place to assist commercial radio broadcasters to deal with broadcasting services in times of emergency or disaster recovery'. It advised FARB that it considered the matter should be addressed by implementing a Code of Practice and associated guidelines. It considered the code and guidelines should address the following minimum requirements.
1. Ensuring the contact details for the relevant State Emergency Service contact person in the area are known to the Broadcasters and all relevant staff at all times; and
 2. Ensuring that each commercial radio stations broadcasts any emergency service announcements when necessary; and
 3. Providing contact details of the relevant staff on duty who can interrupt radio services (particularly pre-recorded services) to broadcasts such announcements.²⁵
- 4.29 It seems extraordinary that such fundamental requirements have not previously been spelled out in Australia's 60 years of broadcasting. A draft code and guidelines were developed and released by FARB in July for comment by early September 2001.

DRAFT CODE ON BROADCAST OF EMERGENCY INFORMATION

Purpose

- The purpose of this code is to ensure licensees have procedures in place to enable the timely and accurate broadcast of emergency information.

Broadcast of emergency information

- A licensee will, in consultation with appropriate emergency service organisations, implement a set of internal procedures to enable the timely and accurate broadcast of information supplied by such organisations relating to an existing or threatened emergency.
- A designated position in relation to each station is to be identified as the contact officer for all matters relative to this code.
- It is recognised that compliance by the licensee with clause 1.2 of this code is dependant upon the co-operation of the emergency service organisations. A licensee will not be regarded as in breach of this code if any emergency service organisation declines or fails to respond to the licensee's request to consult.
- In developing internal procedures pursuant to clause 1.2, a licensee will not be responsible for inaccurate information provided by any emergency service organisation or for the failure of an emergency service organisation to comply with the procedures.
- A licensee will review and, where necessary, update procedures annually.

Guidelines in defining an emergency and identifying appropriate emergency service organisations – these guidelines do not form part of the code.

- 'Emergencies' are generally regarded as situations in which there is an imminent or actual threat within the community, whereby lives are, or property is, at risk and which requires a significant and co-ordinated response by emergency service organisations.
- A range of emergency service organisations will be relevant for each licence area. As a general guide, emergency organisations include Police, Fire, Rural Fire, Ambulance, State Emergency Service (SES) and the weather bureau. The licensee and appropriate emergency organisations in the licence area should jointly identify, develop and maintain effective lines of communication.
- A licence area may have an Emergency Management Committee/Counter Disaster Council or equivalent organisation formed under State/Territory legislation, which is responsible for issuing guidelines to identify key emergency organisations and procedures for broadcasting emergency information. If so, it may be useful to become familiar with such guidelines and procedures.

Source FARB

- 4.30 Before a code is registered, the ABA needs to be satisfied that the code provides appropriately for community safeguards for the matters covered by the code, is endorsed by the majority of broadcasting services in that section of the industry and that members of the public have been given an

adequate opportunity to comment on the code.²⁶ Once registered the code applies to all licensees in that sector of the industry.

4.31 The draft code addresses some of the concerns raised in evidence to the Committee. At issue, however, is the question of whether a code of conduct is a sufficiently powerful tool to address an issue as serious as the community's access to broadcast information in emergency situations or whether a more prescriptive approach is appropriate.

4.32 The ABA clearly considers that a code of conduct is an adequate instrument. In evidence before the Committee, Mr Tanner, General Manager of the ABA, explained:

There are some areas where we actually do have clear room to move. A very good example is one we have already given, which is emergency service responsiveness and radio. That is clearly the type of issue which is related to localism, where the existing code and standards powers are clearly adequate to address it. The ABA is ensuring that that is addressed. It has plenty of power there and I am truly hopeful that FARB are jumping to it and coming up with an adequate code that provides adequate community safeguards. That is an example of a localism issue where there clearly is the power.²⁷

4.33 FARB also made clear that a code of conduct is their preferred approach and claimed that 'because of the diversity of markets, infrastructure, climatic and geographic conditions in Australia, emergencies and natural disasters are varied as are responses, it was impractical to benchmark contingency planning across the nation'.²⁸

4.34 While the ABA accepts FARB's view that its member stations are situated in a variety of climatic conditions and geographic locations and are therefore subject to various types of emergencies and disasters, it does not believe that these considerations 'make it impractical to develop a template for contingency planning across the board'.

Having a template would provide all commercial radio broadcasters with clear guidelines on the minimum standards expected of them in responding to emergencies, thus establishing 'industry best practice' in this regard.²⁹

4.35 In our view, the considerations raised by FARB do not provide sufficient reason not to establish a set of mandatory requirements for the

26 Submission No 79, Vol 1, p 160 (ABA)

27 Transcript of evidence, 29 May 2001, Brisbane, p 901 (Mr Tanner)

28 Submission No 133.02, Vol 8, p 1975 (FARB)

29 Submission No 79.01, Vol 7, p 1516 (ABA)

broadcasting of emergency warnings and other relevant information. In fact the very existence of the variety of situations as described by FARB makes it all the more important for there to be absolute clarity about the responsibilities and obligations of broadcasters in those situations.

- 4.36 A code of conduct may be an appropriate way of dealing with some programming matters concerning community standards of taste or decency. However, we do not believe that a code of conduct is commensurate with the serious nature of the issue in question here, namely the safety of the community.
- 4.37 As made clear in evidence, emergency service organisations and related bodies rely on access to broadcasting media to provide information to the community. Radio is the prime conduit to the community, because it has traditionally been 'live and local' and capable of timely and relevant advice.
- 4.38 As stated earlier, having a licence to broadcast carries with it responsibilities. None is perhaps as critical as providing a community with access to information that is important to its safety in emergency situations. While we re-iterate our acknowledgment that many broadcasters take their social responsibilities very seriously, the evidence provided by emergency service organisations suggests that not all broadcasters have given due weight to these responsibilities. The situation should never have deteriorated to the extent that we heard in evidence during this inquiry. It should not have taken an inquiry to energise the industry or the ABA to give serious attention to this issue.
- 4.39 We acknowledge and welcome FARB's assurance that there is no lack of goodwill between all parties. However, better developed lines of communications and closer and stronger relationships between emergency service organisations and broadcasters must evolve if communities are to have access to timely and relevant information in emergency situations.
- 4.40 Procedures and guidelines are a means to an end and there is room for these to reflect the variations in the climatic conditions and geographic locations and other characteristics of different broadcasting operations and regions.
- 4.41 Procedures established on goodwill, however, have a tendency to fluctuate in their vigour. As mentioned above, FARB has met with various emergency service organisations, the ABC and the Bureau of Meteorology since the issue of the broadcast of emergency announcements was raised in this inquiry. Such meetings are vital if better lines of communications and reliable procedures are to be developed. However, as pointed out by the Bureau of Meteorology such initiatives are not new.

We used to have a formal meeting with representatives of FACT and FARB and the ABC. We called that a bureau-broadcasters working group. That was an initiative of the bureau in the early 1980s to try to encourage that partnership arrangement. We have not had a meeting with them formally as part of that working group for 10 years now, I think. That had limited success, in my experience. It was a useful discussion or coordination means, but there was no formal obligation on the media to broadcast bureau warnings, for example.³⁰

4.42 Therefore, in the interests of the well being and safety of the community, the measures proposed to build relationships, develop guidelines and improve procedures should be underpinned by a clear set of minimum obligations. These obligations should be mandatory on all radio licensees. To this end, we believe that legislation should be developed that reflects the minimum requirements identified by the ABA and referred to at paragraph 4.28 above. At present, there are no provisions in the BSA relating to emergency announcements.

4.43 The legislation should be drafted to accommodate circumstances in which radio stations are not able to broadcast information owing to factors such as the equipment being damaged in the emergency.

4.44 In considering the need for a legislative response to the problem of the broadcasting of emergency information, we note that under the standard licence conditions for commercial radio broadcasting licences in Schedule 2 of the Broadcasting Services Act 1992, a 'licensee will, if the Minister notifies the licensee in writing that an emergency has arisen which makes it important in the public interest that persons authorised by the Minister have control over matter broadcast using the licensee's broadcasting facilities, allow these persons access to and control over facilities'.³¹

4.45 The scale and nature of some emergency situations would no doubt warrant such action and the provision under Schedule 2 represents an important community safeguard.

4.46 FARB argued that:

While this legislative power allows the Minister control over broadcasting in cases of emergency, it wrests the power to broadcast information about such emergencies out of the hands of broadcasters. It also does nothing to improve the lines of communication between radio stations and emergency response

30 Transcript of evidence, 30 January 2001, Melbourne, p 121 (Mr Wright)

31 *Broadcasting Services Act 1992*, Schedule 2, Part 4, Clause 8

agencies, and it is a path of clear communication between these agencies and radio stations which is required.³²

- 4.47 In our assessment, the emergency service organisations that we have heard from in this inquiry are not seeking a power as extensive as that implied in Schedule 2 of the Act. Nor are they seeking to have 'the power to broadcast information about such emergencies' wrest 'out of the hands of broadcasters'. They are simply seeking a guarantee, provided by legislation, that when the need arises, broadcasters will work with them to provide the community with essential information.
- 4.48 Given this, we believe that there needs to be provision made in the BSA for that level of guarantee. This should not require licensees to receive written notification from the Minister.
- 4.49 According to FARB, any recommendations should apply equally to all broadcast media-commercial, community, narrowcast and television.
- 4.50 Given that the goal is to achieve as wide a coverage as possible of relevant emergency information, we are inclined to agree. Nevertheless, we consider that the extensive reach of commercial radio services places a special responsibility upon commercial radio broadcasters.
- 4.51 While, of course, emergency service organisations may not need access to all broadcasters in every emergency situation, we believe it is imperative that all broadcasters maintain the ability to interrupt programming (be it live, pre-recorded, automated or networked programming) at any time in response to requests from emergency service organisations. To this end, we believe that the obligations we propose should apply to all categories of broadcasting services.
- 4.52 It is also important that broadcasters are involved routinely in disaster response planning activities. This will help ensure that the expectations, capacities and responsibilities of all parties are well understood and contingencies are prepared for before emergency situations arise.
- 4.53 As demonstrated by the tragedies associated with the 1999 Sydney-Hobart yacht race, the unclear allocation of responsibility and breakdowns in communication can have disastrous consequences. The inquiries and inquests following this race lead to the establishment of procedures to ensure better and quicker responses such circumstances in future. As the consequences of breakdowns in the broadcast of emergency service announcements are potentially even more catastrophic, it is to be hoped that all parties will learn from this experience and immediately implement the measures described in this chapter.

Recommendation 14

- 4.54 **The Minister for Communications, Information Technology and the Arts should prepare amendments to the *Broadcasting Services Act 1992* with the object of requiring broadcasters to take responsibility for:**
- **ensuring the contact details for the relevant State Emergency Service contact person in the area are known to all relevant broadcasting staff at all times;**
 - **any emergency service announcements considered necessary by an accredited emergency service organisation or other such body are broadcast; and**
 - **providing to accredited emergency service organisations up-to-date contact details for staff with the authority to interrupt programmed radio services (particularly pre-recorded, automated and networked services) in order to broadcast emergency service announcements.**

Recommendation 15

- 4.55 **The Minister for Communications, Information Technology and the Arts should prepare amendments to the *Broadcasting Services Act 1992* to require:**
- **that, as a condition of any broadcasting licence, broadcasters maintain properly developed emergency response plans; and**
 - **the Australian Broadcasting Authority to regularly audit the emergency response plans maintained by broadcasters and check that the procedures in place would allow programmed services to be interrupted in the event of an emergency.**

Recommendation 16

- 4.56 **The Minister for Defence, in conjunction with the Ministerial Council of Emergency Service Ministers, should develop protocols to ensure that radio and television station managers (or their delegates) are represented on local and regional State Emergency Service Committees and disaster response coordinating organisations.**

Measures to assist broadcasters

4.57 FARB drew our attention to two factors that impact on the capacity of broadcasters to respond to emergency situations.

The first is that that radio is not prioritised, legislatively or otherwise, as being one of the first to be informed about emergency situations at a national, regional and local level.

The second is that there is no priority, enshrined in legislation or regulation, or upheld in practice, whereby priority is given by telecommunications providers, public utilities or emergency response agencies to repair, or assist in the repair of radio broadcasting equipment in the event that it is damaged as a result of an emergency situation such as fire, flood or storm.³³

4.58 FARB claimed that while the first is generally fulfilled, the second was critical if radio 'is to be relied upon, and indeed, if there is to be any pressure exerted for regulatory or code of practice obligations on commercial radio in regard to emergency broadcasts'.

4.59 FARB proposed that a form of universal service obligation be imposed on public utilities and telecommunications providers to give priority to the repair of broadcasting equipment in emergency situations.

4.60 We support in principle the notion that measures are implemented to ensure that broadcasting equipment that has been damaged during an emergency is repaired as soon as possible taking into consideration the safety of all parties involved.

4.61 However, without having taken evidence from telecommunications or public utilities providers on this issue, we are not prepared to demand that universal service obligation as proposed be imposed. We consider, however that the proposal warrants serious consideration by the Minister.

Recommendation 17

- 4.62 **The Minister for Communications, Information Technology and the Arts should consider whether it would be appropriate to specify in legislation that, where broadcasting facilities are damaged in an emergency situation and where there is an expectation that broadcasters transmit emergency service announcements, telecommunications providers should give priority to repairing damaged equipment, infrastructure or links to essential broadcasting equipment.**

Improving communications

- 4.63 The obligations we have described do not obviate the need for improving communications and re-establishing close contact and re-building trust and co-operative relationships between emergency service organisations and radio stations where these have weakened. Indeed, some of the processes affecting the timeliness, accuracy and integrity of announcements are most effectively developed by negotiation between the parties concerned at the local level. This will require the goodwill of all parties concerned. We are pleased therefore to learn from FARB that there is indeed no lack of goodwill and that there is, moreover, a clear desire by all parties to re-establish firm lines of communications and ongoing review'.
- 4.64 In a supplementary submission, FARB described having initiated discussions with representatives of the NSW State Emergency Services, the Weather Bureau and the Victorian Management Council Media Committee. It had also had a meeting with the ABC and senior officers of the Bureau of Meteorology which had resulted in an agreement to review earlier guidelines on the broadcasting of meteorological information .
- 4.65 We welcome these initiatives and commend FARB's proposal to foster regular forums between commercial radio, ABC and emergency organisations to ensure coverage of potential disasters facing the community. We trust that FARB and other agencies will continue their efforts in this area and that they are extended to involve broadcasters and emergency organisations and local government bodies in all states. Such measures reflect the role broadcasters should be prepared to play in emergency situations and must continue to overlay the minimum obligations we recommend.

Role of community stations

- 4.66 Although it may be argued that the role of community stations could be expanded in emergency situations, it was pointed out by the NSW SES that the value of community stations in emergency situations is limited by their restricted area of coverage and small listening audiences.³⁴
- 4.67 Community stations have made valuable contributions in different emergency situations. Their audience, however small still requires information in emergency situations as do the audiences of narrowcast stations. Community radio stations should be under the same obligation to respond to requests to broadcasts emergency announcements and other information as commercial broadcasters. Every effort should be made to include these services in forums and other meetings dealing with this issue.

A problem foreseen can be averted

- 4.68 In discussing the impact of networking on announcements in emergency situations, the Bureau of Meteorology expressed some concern about the cumulative impact of listeners hearing warnings that were not relevant to their area. 'In time,' the Bureau suggested, 'the frequent hearing of irrelevant warnings will reduce the impact of hearing a warning that is relevant for a user in an affected geographic locality.'³⁵
- 4.69 We agree that it is far preferable for emergency service announcements to be made only in relevant areas. While we accept that this may, in some circumstances, present difficulties for radio stations operating as part of larger group, our recommendation (at paragraph 4.52 above) is intended to ensure that localised emergency service announcements can be made whenever they are necessary. However, if in some circumstances it is not possible to broadcast a localised emergency service announcement, it would better that the announcement be broadcast across a network of stations than not at all.
- 4.70 This type of implementation issue should be the subject of further discussion in the series of forums that we hope to see conducted around Australia between the industry and emergency service organisations in the near future. We also suggest that ABA should close monitor the issue and advise the Minister at the first sign of any evidence indicating that

34 Submission No 136, Vol 5, p 774 (NSW SES)

35 Submission No 179, Vol 5, p 962 (Bureau of Meteorology)

emergency service announcements are not locally relevant and are losing their impact.