

8 August 2003

Committee Secretary
House Select Committee on the recent Australian bushfires
Department of the House of Representatives
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Dear Sir,

SUBMISSION TO THE 2003 FEDERAL BUSHFIRE INQUIRY

Thank you for allowing me the opportunity to make this submission to the Federal Bushfire Inquiry.

I am the principal radio journalist for 3NE & Edge FM, two Wangaratta-based radio stations that covers approximately 270,000km of North East Victoria & Southern NSW. On average, over 11,000 motor vehicles travel through our listening area each day along the Hume Highway.

During the period of the North-East bushfire crisis, our station broadcast fire updates and information almost 24-hours per day, no mean feat given ordinarily our station is only manned 12-hours per day.

3NE Edge FM made the decision early in the piece that we would rely on local knowledge and information directly from the Incident Control Centres (ICC), as opposed to that streaming from the Melbourne-based Department of Sustainability and Environment. Primarily because we felt our local people had a better grasp of the terrain and as many communities were relying upon our broadcasts for their safety, it was vitally important our information be up-to-date.

Due to our up-to-date coverage, our profile became such that we received upwards of 50 calls a day from local people both requesting information on the fires and passing information on to us to broadcast and forward to the ICC's. Many times during the course of the fires the Federal Member for Indi, Ms Sophie Panopoulos visited our radio station for fire updates.

Much has been made of the bushfire information distributed by the Victorian Department of Sustainability and Environment's (DSE) Melbourne-based media centre.

I believe it is important to note that 3NE Edge FM did not utilize the DSE's information; we dealt directly with local ICC's and people on-ground during the fires. Hence I am confident to say that our coverage of the fires was true, accurate and locally based. There have been no complaints about our broadcasts.

On two occasions I felt it necessary to contact Melbourne-based 3AW and instruct them to pull their stories as they were reporting misinformation and causing unnecessary alarm.

The newspaper and Melbourne-based reports didn't seem to reflect the actual on-ground situation during the fires. There were at least two incorrect reports, one of a 'fire-ball' hitting Mt Beauty and another of the Yackandandah township being on fire.

I was alerted to the incorrect stories being run on 3AW by local people who had received frantic telephone calls from Melbourne-based friends or relatives.

At one stage a gentleman from Mount Beauty rang 3NE Edge FM and requested the contact details for 3AW as his Melbourne-based son had called in a panic having heard on 3AW that Mount Beauty was ablaze. The gentleman wanted to contact 3AW in Melbourne to correct their news item.

I would assume the source of 3AW's information on these occasions was the DSE.

During the fires we twice received evacuation notices, one for Mitta Mitta and another from the Bright township. We took great care not to cause unnecessary alarm and issued warnings directly as instructed by the Police, not the DSE. Both times we made it quite clear to our listeners that these evacuation notices were only advisory.

From our perspective, communications during the bushfires were excellent, this is because we dealt with local people who had local on-ground knowledge. We are more than happy with the treatment we received and the information flow from the Incident Control Centres.

In the future, Melbourne-based departments and media outlets should source their information correctly and adhere to the universal rule of journalism, always check your facts.

Yours sincerely



TONY TYNAN
News Director
3NE Edge FM