COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

Official Committee Hansard

SENATE

ENVIRONMENT AND COMMUNICATIONS REFERENCES COMMITTEE

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

MONDAY, 8 AUGUST 2011

CANBERRA

BY AUTHORITY OF THE SENATE

INTERNET

Hansard transcripts of public hearings are made available on the internet when authorised by the committee.

The internet address is:

http://www.aph.gov.au/hansard

To search the parliamentary database, go to:

http://parlinfo.aph.gov.au

SENATE

ENVIRONMENT AND COMMUNICATIONS REFERENCES COMMITTEE

Monday, 8 August 2011

Senators in attendance: Senators Back, Bilyk, Boyce, Cameron, Humphries and McKenzie

Terms of reference for the inquiry:

To inquire into and report on:

The capacity of communication networks and emergency warning systems to deal with emergencies and natural disasters, with particular reference to:

a. the effectiveness of communication networks, including radio, telephone, Internet and other alert systems (in particular drawing on the spate of emergencies and natural disasters of the 2010/2011 Australian summer):
   (i) in warning of the imminent threat of an impending emergency,
   (ii) to function in a coordinated manner during an emergency, and
   (iii) to assist in recovery after an emergency;
b. the impact of extended power blackouts on warning systems for state emergency services, including country fire brigades and landholders or home owners;
c. the impact of emergencies and natural disasters on, and implications for, future communication technologies such as the National Broadband Network;
d. the scope for better educating people in high-risk regions about the use of communications equipment to prepare for and respond to a potential emergency or natural disaster;
e. new and emerging technologies including digital spectrum that could improve preparation for, responses to and recovery from, an emergency or natural disaster; and
f. any other relevant matters.

WITNESSES

GAUGHAN, Assistant Commissioner Neil, National Manager, High Tech Crime Operations, Australian Federal Police

GILLILAND, Commander Robert, AFP Operations Coordination Centre, Australian Federal Police

PHELAN, Deputy Commissioner Michael, Close Operations Support, Australian Federal Police

Committee met at 9:19

ACTING CHAIR (Senator Cameron): I declare open this public hearing of the Senate Standing Committee on Environment and Communications in its inquiry into the capacity of communication networks and emergency warning systems to deal with emergencies and natural disasters. The committee's proceedings today will follow the program as circulated. These are public proceedings. The committee may also agree to a request to have evidence heard in camera or may determine that certain evidence should be heard in camera. I remind all witnesses that in giving evidence to the committee they are protected by parliamentary privilege. It is unlawful for anyone to threaten or disadvantage a witness on account of evidence given to a committee, and such action may be treated by the Senate as a contempt. It is also a contempt to give false or misleading evidence to the committee. If a witness objects to answering a question, the witness should state the ground upon which the objection is to be taken and the committee will determine whether it will insist on an answer having regard to the ground which is claimed. If the committee determines to insist on an answer, a witness may request that the answer be given in camera. Such a request may of course also be made at any other time.

I welcome representatives from the Australian Federal Police—and thank you for talking to us today. As Commonwealth officers, you will not be asked to give opinions on matters of policy, though this does not preclude questions asking for explanations of policy or factual questions about when and how policies were adopted. The committee has received your submission as submission 38. Do you wish to make any amendments or alterations to your submission?

Mr Phelan: No, thank you.

ACTING CHAIR: Do you wish to make a brief opening statement before we go to questions?

Mr Phelan: Yes, I do if you do not mind. Thank you for the opportunity to make an opening statement to this hearing into the capacity of communication networks and emergency warning systems to deal with emergencies and natural disasters. I would like to address the issue of nationally interoperable public safety mobile broadband capability to support Australian police, fire, emergency, health and emergency services agencies to prepare for, prevent, respond to and recover from man-made natural threats to lives and properties.

The Department of Broadband, Communications and the Digital Economy and the Attorney-General's Department are coordinating the Commonwealth's involvement in this work. At a meeting on 10 May 2011 hosted by the federal Attorney-General and the Minister for Broadband, Communications and the Digital Economy, police commissioners and representatives from public safety agencies and the telecommunications industry were advised to expect that no portion of the 700 megahertz band would be reserved for public safety agencies for mobile broadband applications. It was agreed at this meeting that a joint standing committee on public safety mobile broadband would be established to advise on the possibility of using a portion of the 800 megahertz band. The Attorney-General and minister for communications are consulting with public safety agencies via this steering committee. It is the AFP's preference to share in any proposed allocation and any established network.

Senator BACK: Thank you for your submission. In terms of a natural disaster emergency response, at what point do the Federal Police come in? Are you invited by state or territory authorities or do you have the right to deploy immediately a natural disaster is developing?

Mr Phelan: Essentially it depends upon the level of response. Generally these things are coordinated at a national level and the Australian Federal Police puts its services at the disposal of national coordinating committees, the National Crisis Committee et cetera. Generally it is at the invitation of the states, but there are some things we can do without permission to go in, though most of the time it is on a cooperative basis. If we look at the tragic events of earlier this year, everything was done on a cooperative basis, particularly in Queensland.

Senator BACK: As part of that exercise or process, what role, if any, does Emergency Management Australia have in that coordination, particularly coordinating the Australian Federal Police involvement?

Mr Phelan: The Commonwealth's response is coordinated by Emergency Management Australia, into which the Australian Federal Police feed through the National Crisis Committee and other government committees that

are formed. All of our assets, all of our technical support—everything that we have available including numbers et cetera—are put at the disposal of these committees and then the liaison goes from EMA to others. Having said that, there is also direct liaison police to police. For example, if I hark back to January with Cyclone Yasi and the floods, there was involvement directly with the Queensland Police Service as well.

Senator BACK: Members of the committee and the community would understand the direct policing to policing relationship. Can you explain what role, in addition to a direct policing association, the Australian Federal Police can offer to emergency services as part of your brief?

Mr Phelan: We certainly have equipment and so on that is available to us. We have the ability also to liaise with overseas agencies when there are certain things that need to be done overseas. For example, with the Christchurch disaster we had the ability to coordinate and get our people over there and work with agencies. It is also about our logistic support—the communications systems that we have available. We have the ability to deliver real-time information to all our state and territory colleagues right across the Commonwealth at once and also to our own members on the ground, so there is the ability there for comms as well, which is one of the main things we bring to the table.

Senator BACK: In relation to the Christchurch incident, the Rural Affairs and Transport Committee was in New Zealand recently and I should record for the committee the overwhelming appreciation of everybody in New Zealand, led by the Speaker of the House, not just for the speed of response by the Australian Federal Police but overwhelmingly the presence at the memorial function by the Governor-General, the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition. It was very much appreciated. I am sure others will want to ask about broadband allocation so I will stay away from that. Recognising the need for confidentiality in the policing to policing levels of communication, can you tell me whether the Australian Federal Police, particularly in relation to the recent natural disasters, are satisfied that there is a uniformity of communications across and between the various emergency services? I ask you this more from the viewpoint that you are not as an agency day to day involved in state or territory activities, but surely you have the opportunity to be able to observe whether you feel, for example, a confluence of communications between state police, fire services, ambulance and SES right through the chain of command and incident control. Are you satisfied that we have got that right? I specifically ask about that in relation to the relatively recent experiences of Queensland and Victoria, and I will then ask about the ACT fires of 2003.

Mr Phelan: Things can always get better—I do not think there is any doubt about that. I can only speak from our personal experience in relation to particularly the incidents in Queensland. Because we worked hand in glove with the Queensland police, in particular in relation to the floods and also Cyclone Yasi, we were able to use our own communication systems and because we were embedded with the Queensland police there was no particular requirement this time to encrypt our mobile handsets and so on with theirs, even though there is the ability to do that. We do have the ability with some, though not all, jurisdictions.

Senator BACK: You have noted that in your submission.

Mr Phelan: That is right. There was no actual requirement to do that in Queensland. Generally I think it works very well but it certainly can be improved. The steering committee looking at broadband communication is looking at harmonising it right across all law enforcement and emergency services so that that interoperability is a lot easier. There is no doubt that, for example, if emergency services cross from one state to another sometimes their equipment does not talk to each other. That is certainly the experience, though I was not there at the time, if we go back to the ACT bushfires. Things have changed a lot since then. Certainly that was the case.

Senator BACK: If I recall correctly from your submission, it was the states of Victoria, South Australia and Tasmania that did not have that interoperability. Are you aware of any moves being made to bring them into the fold so that you do have that uniformity across the country?

Mr Phelan: Apart from us all trying to move towards something in the next five years, on the voice side, with ACMA, we are looking at harmonisation across the 400-megahertz spectrum, which involves all voice communications. We are trying to do our best to harmonise all the equipment in the spectrum available there. In terms obviously of data, we are looking at the 800 spectrum and we are looking at the 700 spectrum as well—the high broadband area. So there are moves afoot to look at it but to say it is a complex issue is an understatement, from all of our points of view.

Senator BILYK: In your submission you talk about Project Spectrum. Can you elaborate on what it actually is, what the terms of reference are and what the timeline is for that. I understand it is about implications for future communication technologies, but how important would national broadband be to pursuing that?

Mr Phelan: It will be, but perhaps I can give a little background on what Spectrum actually is. In terms of this committee it has an unfortunate name, I suppose, being called Spectrum, but it is our new program of work in the AFP which we received funding for a number of years ago to build our new case management system within the AFP's computer system. It is basically going to replace our current case management system, which was built in house but is starting to get a bit old, too slow, too clunky, so we are embarking on a program to build a new system. One of the things we want to do when we build this new system is make sure it is interoperable and scalable as much as we can, particularly with our state and territory colleagues and also other partners that we work with both in their national security space and in general policing. In essence, the new case management system and intelligence digestion tools, et cetera, that we are going to build have to work for the street police officer in the ACT all the way through to those that we have working in our counterterrorism operations in the national security space. We are investing a lot of time and effort doing that.

We moved last year from a built in-house project to purchasing some off-the-shelf products and then integrating them into our system. At the moment we are going through a tender process so I cannot talk too much about that, only to say that tenders are closed and we are evaluating the tenders against some 1,500 requirements that the AFP wanted for the system. Having said that, in terms of the last part of your question the AFP has a networked system throughout Australia and throughout the world. Every single one of our terminals in real time can see what our people in Canberra and our people in London can see, as well as Cyprus and the Solomon Islands and everywhere else we are represented. Data communications and the level of traffic every year is growing exponentially. It is affecting our data holdings but it is also affecting our traffic, so anything across the lines for us that increases bandwidth and makes it cheaper is good for us in the long term. It is all about deployability. For example, if we are not in our capital cities or in our offices we use encrypted wireless communications; if we have the ability not to have to use wireless encryption then it would obviously be better as well. It is yet to be seen exactly what effect the National Broadband Network will have on our systems, but certainly we need as wide a pipe as we can for as much data as we are going to push down in the next 10 to 15 or 20 years.

Senator BILYK: The other area I am particularly interested in is how the AFP alerts people with disability in a serious situation. Do you have any special programs for alerting those people?

Mr Phelan: Not specifically. I hark back to the days when I was the Chief Police Officer of the ACT and we exercised a number of these things for mass communications with the public in the ACT. It is the call of emergency services in the ACT as to whether or not they enact the alert, but the alerts themselves are sent out by the ACT Policing Operations centre in Canberra.

Senator BILYK: How are they sent out—in what format?

Mr Phelan: We can send them out to telephones and to mass media to have them put out broadcasts et cetera. We have commitments from the radio stations, in particular, and TV stations in the ACT, as do other jurisdictions, that those messages will receive priority. Having worked in and exercised some of the emergency management committees that we have here, I know that areas of the ACT government that deal with disability issues are represented on those committees. We try our best to get to as many people as we can. You would like to think that lists of people who are infirm are provided to the police to enable them to do that. There are procedures in place—I do not know them specifically, but I know that we do try to get to as many people as we possibly can. If I hark back to the bushfires, uniformed police officers were running through flames knocking on doors to make sure that everybody was out.

Senator BILYK: We greatly appreciate that. Someone with an intellectual disability, for example, might be very frightened by sirens or being told they need to evacuate. Do you have specific policies or do you use standard procedures?

Mr Phelan: I am sure we do have policies at the micro level and I would be happy to table those. Rather than fumbling through them, it would be better if I were to take them on notice and get them to you, particularly the ACT ones. They are quite specific.

Senator BILYK: Yes, please do so. When you talked about Project Spectrum you mentioned states and territories. Does that project involve all states and territories or is it just the ACT and the AFP?

Mr Phelan: The ACT and the AFP. The AFP's current system is called PROMIS. At the moment the ACC use PROMIS and the Northern Territory police use PROMIS, so we are working closely with them as well. We are also part of a number of working groups, particularly with CrimTrac and the National Counter-Terrorism Committee, which both have projects on their books in relation to case management systems that can be used across all systems, particularly in the national security space. For example, if there is a terrorism incident or

national security incident in New South Wales, our colleagues in Victoria and Queensland, as it affects them, can have access to that information in real-time as well, so all of our investigators are working on it together. A number of projects are being worked on together and they are closely aligned with the AFP's Project Spectrum. Out of the evaluation that we are doing for the tender processes we will make sure that what we eventually buy is scalable for those other circumstances. We are not going this alone.

Senator BILYK: Following on from Senator Back's question about all the states and territories not being in alignment, is there goodwill with those other states and territories?

Mr Phelan: Yes, very much so. If we go back to radio spectrum, for example—and I am not a technical expert—

Senator BILYK: You are not alone, trust me!

Mr Phelan: I was involved in meetings as far back as 2007, when issues of harmonisation and movements off spectrum had to occur because licences were coming up or things had to be sold and so on. There is a lot of goodwill amongst all of the emergency services—not just police but also ambulance, fire brigade, rural bushfire services et cetera—to try and get together. All the various standing committees that represent those groups are represented on the steering committee that has been formed by the Attorney-General and the communications minister. It is at that high level that we have tried to get together as many of the different players as we possibly can.

Senator BILYK: What is the steering committee called?

Mr Phelan: So I do not mislead you, let me get the exact title. It is a joint steering committee called the Public Safety Mobile Broadband Steering Committee.

Senator HUMPHRIES: Can I press you a bit more on the issue raised by both Senator Back and Senator Bilyk about interoperability. In 2009, COAG agreed that all communications systems should be seamlessly interoperable. You have described in your submission how there are three states operating with different radio networks and there is the availability of the national counterterrorism framework for some interoperability but it is not the standard operating system used. Have Australia's emergency services organisations met the requirements of the 2009 COAG decision to have fully interoperable communication systems?

Mr Phelan: Yes. The National Coordinating Committee for Government Radiocommunications, NCCGR, reports to both COAG and to the national emergency services committee and has been given responsibility for coordinating the use of government radio band. The aim is that by 2020 all government radio systems must be interoperable. I am not on the committee but certainly I am aware that it has been formed and is working towards the goals of COAG.

Senator HUMPHRIES: That means that by 2020 we will have interoperability but we are not there yet.

Mr Phelan: No, we are not there you get. As I said before, even sitting on the sideline, as the AFP does, you can see that it is an extremely complex issue. Over the years there have been different spectrums allocated to different agencies in different states which have different levels of equipment. With the AFP's role, all the equipment has a lifespan which comes up at different times. They all appreciate at different rates. They will come up for replacement at different times. It is a matter of not only harmonising the spectrum; it is also harmonising the equipment and making sure that it all comes to fruition at the same time.

Senator HUMPHRIES: Presumably with the decision looming about allocation of spectrum between 700 and 800 megahertz bands, we will not be waiting until 2020 to make that decision. If we wait until then, obviously that spectrum will have been allocated. We will have to make the decision much more imminently than that.

Mr Phelan: Yes. At the moment in relation to voice the group is working on harmonisation within the 400 megahertz band. That is the plan at this stage. Everybody is trying to work towards that. The issue around the 700 and 800 megahertz is for high-end broadband usage, which is something for the future. It is extremely important to law enforcement because we do not have a crystal ball. In our armoury we want to be able to send things like video and thank you picture files down wireless broadband networks to get out to our people in the field. We might have a limited capacity to do that at the moment but one does not have to be Einstein to work out that that is going to be a major requirement for all law enforcement and emergency services as we move forward.

Senator HUMPHRIES: Indeed. You will have seen the submission from the Police Federation.

Mr Phelan: I have seen a summary of it and I roughly know what their view is.

Senator HUMPHRIES: Do you see their view that it is imperative that there be access to the 700 band range for emergency services, including police?

Mr Phelan: Yes.

Senator HUMPHRIES: At this stage would that be your view as well?

Mr Phelan: We have represented on the steering committee and my honest view is that I do not know whether 700 or 800 is the same or better or worse. I am not a technical expert. I have seen advice from both sides which have different views. I simply do not know. However, I do know that we need one of them, one or the other. As we move forward, law enforcement in particular and emergency services are going to need some sort of high-end broadband to be able to do our job. Situational awareness at the point where an incident occurs for people making command decisions is absolutely imperative. The more information you can get better decisions you will make. Could you imagine what it would have been like in 2003 at the time of the bushfires had we been able to send real live pictures of for example what was happening from our police and emergency officers at the scene back to the command centre. Much higher quality decisions can be made by command with the more information you have. That just stands to reason. While there is the capability to do it in terms of equipment, we still need the mechanism, the ability I suppose, to transmit the information. In the future there is no doubt that law enforcement and emergency services need some sort of high end bandwidth in the wireless format.

Senator HUMPHRIES: Again on the question of interoperability of radio systems, I know that you, Commander Gilliland, were involved in the AFP's response to the bushfires in Victoria a couple of years ago. Did AFP need radio connectivity with Victorian police or emergency services, and if so was that achieved with the communication system you were using?

Mr Gilliland: The Australian Federal Police responded a total of 274 personnel to the Victorian bushfire crisis in police to police support to our Victorian colleagues. In relation to the communications network and harmonisation into the Victorian network, part of our forward deployment was a series of radio technicians and equipment, and in essence we operated on an AFP frequency that could be linked into the Victorian system. To support that wider command and control coordination and a situation of awareness, we also embedded AFP officers into the Victorian authorities' command systems. We had connectivity in the sense of communications but we also had situational awareness in the sense of the strategic direction the Victorian authorities were taking.

Senator HUMPHRIES: So if a Victorian policeman needed to communicate with an AFP officer who was down there, you would have used the Victorian radio system to do that?

Mr Gilliland: The ability was there but the way it was deployed was that we had Victorian police officers with AFP officers on the ground.

Senator HUMPHRIES: So you overcame the problem of incompatibility between the two communications systems by doing that. That is a luxury you might not always be able to afford. If you got a situation where you did not have resources to double up officers like that, you say your system could have connected but did not necessarily connect with the Victorian system.

Mr Gilliland: It was a technical solution that was relatively limited in its applicability to the Victorian network. As Deputy Commissioner Phelan indicated earlier, there is much more opportunity to capitalise on technology that actually integrates agencies as a whole.

Senator HUMPHRIES: That is a problem we need to fix with this discussion that is going on at the moment.

Mr Gilliland: Yes.

Senator HUMPHRIES: Are all of the recommendations of the Doogan coronial inquiry in the ACT as far as they affect the AFP implemented at this point in time?

Mr Phelan: I am not entirely sure whether they all have been as they relate to the AFP, but I certainly know we have gone a long way towards trying to implement every single one of them. Most of the stuff that related to the AFP was about integration with emergency services and joint command and control. I certainly know that now what we do is that we have joint forward command posts when things occur so that we make sure emergency services are there with AFP as well so we do not have two forward command posts—they are completely joined up. Even in my 2½ years we have exercised that at least half a dozen times. I think that was the major criticism that the coroner made. We also ensure that we have emergency services in the Police Operations Centre as well—not only one representative but multiple representatives, from ambulance and fire as well, so we can link in to all their communications.

Senator HUMPHRIES: Could you take on notice the question of whether there are any which are yet to be implemented, please.

Mr Phelan: Absolutely.

Senator McKENZIE: Commander Gilliland, I want to follow up on the 2009 bushfire and the AFP's involvement in that operation. I want to ask a question about communicating with other organisations, such as the DSE or the CFA. How did that go?

Mr Gilliland: The AFP's role was to provide police support to Victorian police. Victorian police maintained the lead agency status and Victorian police were responsible for engaging with their partner agencies in the Victoria space.

Senator McKENZIE: But in terms of looking at that interoperability going forward where we are drawing in other organisations not just police organisations, I assume that we need to look at those other organisations.

Mr Gilliland: If one was to reflect upon the 2003 Canberra bushfires as opposed to the tragic events in Victoria, nationally we have gone a long way in the sense of achieving interagency interoperability by way of command, control and coordination arrangements. Nationally, our emergency management and police colleagues have adopted what is referred to as the incident command and control system. It looks at certain capabilities within the system, such as planning, logistics, administration, operations, intelligence, investigation and public information management. Nationally, in a doctrinal sense, that methodology is being used across all public safety agencies. In essence, what that means is that we speak a common language at the tactical and operational levels. That is indeed promoting interoperability across those public safety agencies.

Senator McKENZIE: Thank you. In terms of listing the different methods of communications that the AFP uses, I am just wondering if you can comment on the geographic restrictions on any of those—if there are any.

Mr Phelan: Obviously, if we are using our data lines then we are restricted, as they are hard coded to our offices, which are all the way round the coast, basically—Cairns, the Gold Coast, Brisbane, Sydney, Melbourne, Adelaide and Perth. And each of the airports is linked up as well and some of the Defence establishments—bases where we have protective service officers. That is the hard line. Then we can also utilise our computer systems through the 3G network. The limitation there is where 3G data will link to. If we want to take my laptop, for example, and have real time access to our computer systems, I am limited by where our encryption will work, which is as far as the 3G network can go. In terms of satellite communications—phones—we have fly-a-way kits for that. In terms of our radio network, we are pretty much limited by the geographic locations of the major cities. However, we can send out portable repeaters as well if we need to do that. They can either link into the main network via a series of repeaters or we can set them up for a local network.

Senator McKENZIE: So is the encrypted wireless technology that you are using out and about adequate at the moment?

Mr Phelan: It gets the data there. It is very slow. It is standard 3G data transfer. If you are trying to download big files and go into the AFP mainframe system, it is—

Senator McKENZIE: You are there for a while.

Mr Phelan: It is not as quick as using it off your desktop.

Senator McKENZIE: Do you see any point in the future where you will be plugging cords in out and about?

Mr Phelan: Not necessarily plugging in cords. But you would like to think that some kinds of nodes might be out there. For us, it is about speed. If you look at the mobile computing that we use everyday—even in our patrol cars, for example—that is off a 3G network. If we could somehow make that quicker, that would be good. Mobile broadband is getting better, for example. There is more bandwidth available. That will help our people on the road. And that is about public confidence as well. No citizen likes to be kept on the side of the road for longer than they need to be. That helps police generally in terms of community attitudes to what we are doing. It is a necessary job but one that they need to be able to do relatively quickly. And there is a proliferation of that. We might have moved from a couple of cars having it to now most of our patrol cars in the ACT having it. But then we are continually adding more things to them. We are looking at number plate recognition systems for all of the traffic cars and some of the general duties cars, which again requires a large amount of data to be able to get back in real time to the database system held by the RTA to see whether or not a car is stolen, whether or not it is registered or whether the driver has a licence or not. As more data builds up on those databases, we need to get back to our offices in real time. Is the photograph on the licence really the person? There are all those sorts of things. We are limited by the amount of technology that is out there not by the amount of holdings, if I can put it like that. There is a lot out there. We are limited by how much we can push down the pipe to get to our members.

ACTING CHAIR: A number of issues have been raised. Firstly, in a natural disaster or an emergency, who makes the decision about what resources the AFP will supply?

Mr Phelan: The commissioner.

ACTING CHAIR: The commissioner makes the call?

Mr Phelan: Yes.

ACTING CHAIR: I suppose you have to balance ongoing operations against the natural disaster.

Mr Phelan: That is right.

ACTING CHAIR: Would you ever be a lead agency in terms of a natural disaster?

Mr Phelan: Only in the ACT. Depending on the incident, the chief police officer of the ACT may in fact be declared the territory controller. If that was the case with a major incident in the ACT, then the ACT government has the full resources of the AFP to bring to bear on that. If it was significant enough that we would declare a territory controller then a lot of the other resources that the AFP has nationally would be pushed towards that as well. But in terms of a natural disaster somewhere else in the Commonwealth, we would put resources at the disposal of whoever the lead agency is and we would make that call dependent on (a) our capability, (b) our capacity and (c) what the opportunity cost for us in terms of our normal day-to-day business. We would free up what was available. Generally, we would free up a fair bit.

ACTING CHAIR: In relation to 700 or 800 megahertz, you say that you do not have the technical expertise to advise what your preferred position would be. I am sure that other people will come here and have that argument.

Mr Phelan: Yes.

ACTING CHAIR: But given that you use 3G at the moment, wouldn't it be reasonable—and I am sure other evidence will come on this—to say that probably Telstra would have the greatest technical expertise in this country? If Telstra had the 700 megahertz spectrum and built a capacity for emergency services within their network, would that be an option?

Mr Phelan: I suppose that would be an option, but I would like it to be cheap; I would like it not to cost. That is the issue for all public sector agencies: cost. In the commercial domain, spectrum—as we know—is a valuable asset. It is getting more expensive. Law enforcement and emergency services—indeed, most public sector agencies who need to utilise it—cannot afford it and cannot compete because we cannot offset those costs. We do not have a revenue stream that comes on the other side of the equation to purchase the asset or the licences. For us, it is about making sure that we have enough. As I said earlier on, I do not whether it is seven or it is eight. All I know is that we need something as we go forward—without a doubt; absolutely.

ACTING CHAIR: There is a bit of blue sky there. You cannot really tell what is going to happen, can you?

Mr Phelan: I can tell you what we use now. But 10 years ago if someone had predicted what we would be using now they would have been a mile off. All I do know is that for us, as Commander Gilliland said, situational awareness is paramount and in order for officers back in command positions to make correct decisions they need to have as much information available to them as they can in real time. Even in terms of hours and so on, it is too late when fires are flying through communities and so on. We really do need these things in minutes. I can see that in the future when the technology is there to capture the information we will need some sort of mechanism to be able to transport that information to command officers. You cannot expect people on the ground to make statewide or area-wide coordinated decisions, because they are not in touch with all of the information.

ACTING CHAIR: You might want to take this on notice. If you were granted access to the 700-megahertz spectrum would you have the technical expertise within your organisation to effectively use it?

Mr Phelan: My understanding is yes, and certainly I have been briefed that we would. It is about the equipment though.

ACTING CHAIR: Yes, the equipment and the cost of the equipment as well.

Mr Phelan: Yes, the cost of the equipment. We have robust systems for deploying communications. We have been doing that for years. Actually operating the equipment I would imagine would be the same as with anything else.

ACTING CHAIR: I am sure there are lots of other questions and you might get some questions on notice, Deputy Commissioner. I thank you all for your appearance and for your help here this morning.

BURGESS, Mr Mark Anthony, Chief Executive Officer, Police Federation of Australia

GAYLER, Ms Dianne Louise, Senior Policy Officer, Police Federation of Australia

[10:02]

ACTING CHAIR: Welcome. The committee has received your submission as submission No. 11. Do you wish to make any amendments or alterations to your submission?

Mr Burgess: We did provide a supplementary submission as well.

ACTING CHAIR: Yes, we have got that, thank you. Do you wish to make a brief opening statement before we go to questions?

Mr Burgess: Yes, thank you.

ACTING CHAIR: Please proceed.

Mr Burgess: As you and the committee would likely be aware, the Police Federation of Australia represents the professional industrial interests of Australia's 55,000 police officers. We talk as one voice on such key national issues as this issue before us today. As you are aware, we have concentrated our submission on term of reference (e), which deals with the capacity of communications networks to deal with emergencies and natural disasters with reference to technologies including digital spectrum. First, I would like to say that what your committee finds and what your committee recommends to government on the question of the 700-megahertz digital dividend is vitally important not only to Australia's police but to the wider Australian community. It will determine the communications capacity of police and emergency services during disasters for decades to come so that it will determine their ability to save lives and protect property. This is because spectrum licences will be issued for 15 years and they will be renewable into the future. The opportunity for Australia's frontline first responders to secure quality spectrum for their communications probably will not occur again in any of our lifetimes. It is an opportunity we need to seize in the national interest and the public interest.

The PFA, in developing the case for 20 megahertz of the 700-megahertz digital dividend, has established, we believe, five compelling matters. The public safety agencies need high-speed mobile broadband communications and they should have a dedicated network separate to those of commercial carriers. For the foreseeable future public safety agencies need 20 megahertz of that spectrum. The 700-megahertz band, the digital dividend, is the band that will work, and the 800-mergahetz band is not a viable option. Finally, public safety agencies will still need roaming capacity using commercial carriers and therefore spectrum conditions will be essential. Our original submission to the committee and the supplementary submission with the most up-to-date information make the case for those five points.

In the remaining few minutes I want to focus on the two-page document attached to our supplementary submission, which compares the 800-megahertz to the 700-megahertz spectrum options. As you know, the Attorney-General and Senator Conroy in May 2011 suggested the 800 band as a possible alternative to the digital dividend for police and emergency services. We have had our doubts and we have now established, we believe conclusively, that the 800-megahertz band is not a viable option. We have road tested the dot-points with a range of technical experts, who agree with us.

What we say is the 800 band is narrow band, so it will not deliver the mobile broadband capability. It is already occupied by carriers and public safety agencies for their narrowband voice communications. There are more than 1,000 licences and 20,000 to 30,000 users in that band, so it would take decades to clear. Far from Australia then being harmonised with countries in the Asia-Pacific, we would be isolated. The June 2011 International Telecommunications Union, ITU, meeting proposed the 700-megahertz band for public safety agencies' broadband services and the 800-megahertz band for narrowband services. Equipment suppliers confirm that devices for public safety agencies are designed for the 700 band, not the 800 band. Police and emergency services would not have the smarts that their counterparts using 700 band devices would have. Even if the 800 band were theoretically possible into the future, the time to implement such an option could be years off.

When you hear evidence from the Australian Communications and Media Authority and the Department of Broadband, Communications and the Digital Economy, they should be at able to advise this committee whether they disagree with any of the dot-points in our two-page summary. It is vital that your committee establish the truth about what is and what is not viable broadband spectrum for public safety communications. It is also critical that this be settled as a matter of urgency, because the clock is ticking on preparations to auction the digital dividend, and ACMA is proceeding with those plans.

Finally, we draw the committee's attention to the terms of the Radiocommunications Act 1992. It requires ACMA to make adequate provision of spectrum:

… for use by agencies involved in the defence or national security of Australia, law enforcement or the provision of emergency services; …

This is a very unusual provision, but it is there for an important public interest purpose and it should be implemented now. It is inconceivable that the government and the parliament would leave police and emergency services in the Dark Ages while the Australian community moves into the digital age. I thank the committee for their attention.

ACTING CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Burgess.

Senator McKENZIE: In your submission you only mention the 2003 Victorian bushfires. Was that just a typo or were there no communication issues in the 2009 Victorian fires?

Mr Burgess: You can rest assured there were communication systems in the 2009 Victorian bushfires; that was a typo, sorry.

Senator HUMPHRIES: You make a very powerful case for the reservation of the 700-megahertz spectrum. It is an issue which I think the committee has to consider very seriously. I know there has been debate about the cost of reserving that spectrum and not selling it off to commercial operators. You make the point that it is conceivable that you could reserve the 20-megahertz spectrum and not diminish the value of the remainder that you spend. That is probably a question this inquiry cannot answer at the moment. I wonder about the difference in the capital costs associated with the hardware and the technology needed to use 700 versus 800 spectrum. Can you give us some indication of what that would be? Are we looking at a major investment with either or both of those bands?

Mr Burgess: There will always be investment with either or both. We have always been of the view that there would be requirements for public-private partnerships in the development of that, so there would be a role for the telcos. But if you are talking about capital set-up costs, as we indicated, most of the equipment that is currently available is available in the 700 band, so you would increase significantly the capital cost to set up if you were to move to the 800 band because new equipment would have to be manufactured. At the moment that is not the case.

Senator HUMPHRIES: Any idea of the difference in the public investment necessary if we go with the 700 or the 800 band in terms of that kind of capital acquisition?

Mr Burgess: I could not answer that question. As I said, albeit we have always been of the view that there would need to be partnerships or arrangements between emergency services and the telcos for this provision. The most important thing about this is who controls the actual spectrum, whether it be emergency services or the telcos and, in our case, we are arguing it should be emergency services.

Senator HUMPHRIES: If we went with the 800 spectrum rather than 700, is there any likelihood that we would actually need to physically replace all of the particular devices that emergency services workers use in the field to access broadband to the extent that they do that anyway at the moment?

Mr Burgess: Our advice at the moment is that devices primarily are built in around 700 megahertz as opposed to the 800, so if Australia was to all but go it alone—we talked about the International Telecommunications Union's decision of June 2011—that would obviously in our minds put Australia in a different scenario to the rest of the world, then you would be looking at making equipment just for Australia. It is a very small market in the overall scheme of things and it would drive the cost of that equipment up.

Senator BILYK: I would like to ask a follow-own question from Senator Humphries' question. In your submission you mention that there are already 700-megahertz bands that can be easily adapted to the Asia Pacific digital dividend spectrum plan. Are you saying that to redevelop something in the 800-megahertz band will only apply to Australia and would not be of any use further afield to us in regard to counter-terrorism or that sort of area?

Mr Burgess: As we understand it, to move Australia to the 800 band as opposed to the 700 would likely put us out of step with the rest of the world, including our region.

Senator HUMPHRIES: To follow that question up: would that mean that if there was, say, a natural disaster somewhere in our region and we deployed Australian police officers into that region that there might be a problem with interoperability with the local emergency services by virtue of having a different band?

Mr Burgess: As we understand it—again, that would probably be a question that you would want to put to the technical experts—if we were operating in a different form of spectrum and our equipment was developed for that specific spectrum, it would put us out of step.

Senator HUMPHRIES: You are talking about broadband and you make the point in your submission about the various problems that occurred in the past in situations like the Victorian Black Saturday bushfires when existing systems failed, particularly Telstra's system and so forth. I take it that you are saying to us that if there are failures in ordinary public access mobile phone communications because of a major knockout of infrastructure as occurred, say, in the Black Saturday fires that this broadband network could deliver to emergency service operators not just broadband information but also voice communications as a back-up?

Mr Burgess: You are right, Senator, and a specific part of the reason for that is that police build their communications system to a much higher standard than the telcos do. They are far more hardened against those sorts of natural disasters because we have to be.

Senator HUMPHRIES: So what form does that take? Does it mean building towers that are fire resistant? How does that actually work?

Mr Burgess: Again, it would probably be better to ask the technical experts that I am sure are going to appear before you about the building of some of those towers. As we understand it, the emergency services build to importance level 1 as opposed to the telcos, who do not build their infrastructure to that same level.

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.

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. The reason I ask the question is to emphasise again that, should we not purchase technology that is consistent with that used in our neighbouring markets, particularly those where the technology might be produced, we are going to have a significant capital cost increase—not just in actual purchase but in the ongoing maintenance. Are you familiar at all with encryption technology? Is that a subject I can ask fairly ask you about or is that a field that you are not familiar with?

Mr Burgess: That would not be a fair question.

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.

Senator BACK: I come back to your comment in relation to your evidence under the Radiocommunications Act. This committee has to take on board, in a sense, the public good test, does it not? It needs to do this because you are making an argument, which I believe is compelling, that the public good must be the highest priority in terms of selection of spectrum and, for that matter, technology.

Mr Burgess: I was not around this place in 1992, but, when that act came in, the parliament at that time was obviously of the understanding, as it would be today, that the public safety agencies could not compete with the telcos when it came to the open market and bidding for spectrum. So we should not be placed in that situation. What I believe that the act is saying is that this parliament needs to take those sorts of things into account and should not put us in the situation where we are pitted against the telcos to obtain appropriate spectrum for the safety of the Australian community.

Ms Gayler: I would like to add to that. The act is unusual because it does not say that the Australian Communications and Media Authority must have regard to the needs of law enforcement and defence, for example. It says, 'make adequate provision for'. This is a very unusual provision, set out in the objects of the act. We believe that, if you accept that mobile broadband communications are part of the need of public safety agencies in the present era, then we believe that 'making adequate provision' includes doing so for mobile broadband communications.

Senator BACK: I think you make a very relevant point. I have no further questions.

Senator BILYK: What would the likely cost be to the AFP and emergency services people if they did have to bid?

Mr Burgess: I do not think that they would bid. I just do not think it would be within their capacity financially to bid against the telcos.

Senator BILYK: What is the time frame for the 700-megahertz digital dividend spectrum being released? Do you have any idea?

Mr Burgess: We believe the auction will be in the second half of next year, 2012. Someone might be able to correct us on that.

Senator BILYK: I think I did read that somewhere. I just forgot, I am sorry.

Senator HUMPHRIES: I want to confirm what I think you were saying to Senator Back about the provisions of the Radiocommunications Act 1992. You said that that requires that the system make adequate provision of spectrum for law enforcement and emergency services. As far as you are aware, the provisions of that act, unless they were repealed, would still apply into the new iteration of technology with the broadband spectrum that is being made available and so that provision is still relevant?

Mr Burgess: It certainly is. I think that provision is as relevant today as it was in 1992 when it was first developed and it would take into account new technologies.

Ms Gayler: If I may add to that, it is worrying that the current convergence review which the government has commissioned has, in a recent discussion paper, talked about changing the objectives of the legislation, including radiocommunications legislation, to delete that particular provision of the act. It suggests to me that they are finding that worrisome and are thinking of doing away with it.

Senator HUMPHRIES: Doing away with it in what sense?

Ms Gayler: There are a number of objects in the Radiocommunications Act, one of which is making maximum efficient use of spectrum. The next one, I think it is (b), is the provision about making adequate spectrum available for law enforcement and emergency services. The proposal coming out will the convergence review has only the first of those objects proposed.

Senator McKENZIE: I would like to pick up on something that was said earlier about the 700 allowing us a little more interoperability with Asian agencies. We heard from previous submissions about the length of time just to get our own internal agencies talking the same talk. I am just wondering whether in any of those international conversations that you are aware of it is just the 700 band, or obviously there are systems issues there as well in being able to communicate with each other.

Mr Burgess: Senator, are you talking about whether allocation of, say, the 700 band would encourage Australian agencies to have a greater interoperability?

Senator McKENZIE: No, I am hoping that is already in train, irrespective of the band. I am talking more about the international conversation, in relation to the wider region.

Mr Burgess: I would trust that, provided we were on the same page as our neighbours with respect to the spectrum that was allocated, it would in essence force us to work closely with them to ensure that there was interoperability. Our great concern is if we were not on the same page, if we were in another area of spectrum to our neighbours, which would cause us all sorts of problems.

Senator BILYK: Mr Burgess, I asked the Deputy Commissioner about alerting people with disability, especially people with intellectual disability, to the need to evacuate and that sort of thing and how they went about it. Do your members get any training in regard to this? Can you tell us what happens with the hands-on people on the ground, how they are trained?

Mr Burgess: To deal with somebody with a disability in an emergency situation?

Senator BILYK: Yes, and telling them that they need to evacuate and making sure that they understand.

Mr Burgess: I could not state by state but it is one of those areas which from time to time cause concern—when police officers and other emergency services workers in conjunction with police officers are alerting people to impending dangers and you find somebody who has some sort of disability and is unable to get out of their premises. The difficulty in those sorts of scenarios is being able to get the appropriate support mechanisms in place when all hell is breaking loose. Certainly our people do have training. I do not know whether you can say it is adequate—I could not comment on that. For someone involved in that sort of work, trying to get people out of dangerous situations when dealing with people with disabilities is always very difficult for the officer and also is a very difficult issue for the person with the disability.

Senator BILYK: Yes. Some of the submissions in other inquiries have talked about being able to explain adequately to people with intellectual disabilities so that they understand. Because your members are the people on the ground doing the work, I am trying to understand the process. Thank you.

ACTING CHAIR: Are you aware that the government has established the Public Safety Mobile Broadband Steering Committee?

Mr Burgess: I am aware of that.

ACTING CHAIR: Are you aware of any technical publication which has cross-referenced the 700-megahertz to the 800-megahertz and provided the difference, because the government is arguing that predominantly they are the same?

Mr Burgess: The only document I am aware of—in fact, it might have been a submission to this inquiry—is from Motorola Solutions who provide a lot of the equipment. I am pretty sure they have made a submission to this inquiry which outlines those differences. Whether that has found its way into that particular committee or the Attorney-General and minister for communications working group I could not say. The terms of reference of that, as I understand it, do not refer at all to the 700-megahertz; they simply referred to the 800-megahertz.

ACTING CHAIR: You have sent us five essential questions in your supplementary submission at point 6, which are that it is agreed that the PSAs need high-speed mobile broadband communications. If the 800 megahertz can provide that, does that satisfy this issue?

Mr Burgess: We are of the view today that no-one has made the case that 800 would suffice. In fact the two-page summary which we provided, with all due respect, says that the 800 would not and could not suffice.

ACTING CHAIR: Is the main argument from your point of view interoperability?

Mr Burgess: There are a range of arguments. One of the aspects is that it is narrowband as opposed to broadband. As we said, there are already 1,000 licences there and there are 20,000 to 30,000 users. It puts us out of step with the rest of the Asia-Pacific region and we say that there are a raft of issues which suggest that the 800-megahertz is just not suitable. Again we would suggest to the committee that, if they are still not convinced about what we have said, they should ask the questions we have put in the two-page document of ACMA and the digital broadband department to get their views. Certainly the technical experts we have spoken to both in policing and out of policing have all agreed with the points we have raised.

ACTING CHAIR: I am looking at the steering committee's terms of reference. One of the issues goes specifically to one of the points you have raised, and that is that the spectrum be available in a reasonable time frame. It really is a matter of trying to deal with your essential questions, and then analysing whether 800 megahertz, which is the government's preferred position, meets those tests.

Mr Burgess: That is right, but there are a whole range of fronts. One of those tests, you are right, is within a suitable timeframe—bearing in mind if there are already 1,000 licences and 20,000 to 30,000 users, you would have to clear the 800-megahertz band before you even started to allocate any of it to emergency services. I could not tell you all of the groups on it but, as we understand it, there are a range of local governments—the Brisbane City Council, for example. They are going to have to be removed from the area of spectrum, as we understand it, before it can start to be allocated to emergency services. It would be a dedicated broadband as opposed to a narrowband system. Again, we keep saying that no-one has convinced us, certainly as we understand policing, that 800 megahertz is a viable option at all.

ACTING CHAIR: Next G uses 800 megahertz, doesn't it?

Ms Gayler: Certainly the major telecommunications companies have 88 per cent I think it is of the 800 band.

ACTING CHAIR: I am not sure whether you are a technical expert—

Ms Gayler: Oh no!

ACTING CHAIR: You are not making a bad fist of it. I understand Australia's 700-megahertz band plan is not harmonised with the US 700-megahertz band. Are you aware of that?

Ms Gayler: I think that is correct but in relation to law enforcement, in the US police have currently 10 megahertz of the 700 band for broadband communications and the Obama administration has proposed a further 10 megahertz of the 700 band, making a total of 20, which is what US law enforcement right across the country has established that they need. On that note, the most recent newsletter of the Police Executive Research Forum outlines the views of police commissioners around the country, fire chiefs around the country and ambulance services around the country on the 700-megahertz issue. By the way, they call it D Block, but it is the 700-megahertz spectrum. It is interesting that the very same debate is raging in the US as it is here. We are a couple of years behind in terms of the public debate. If you would be interested, I would like to table this newsletter for the information of committee members, because it does set out the views of very senior officials in law enforcement and emergency services in the US.

ACTING CHAIR: If there is no objection, the document can be tabled. Are you also aware that, given the disasters in the Asia-Pacific region recently, many of the disaster communications are moving to 800 megahertz?

Ms Gayler: On the contrary, the most recent meeting of the Asia-Pacific telecommunications union decided to propose 700 megahertz for mobile broadband communications and 800 for voice communications. That is why we say that, although ACMA and the broadband department say that harmonisation with our region is important, in fact we are looking like being out of step by proposing that in Australia we use 800 for police and emergency services.

ACTING CHAIR: Motorola already produce the 700-megahertz equipment, don't they?

Ms Gayler: And the 800 as well.

ACTING CHAIR: Is there a compatibility issue between the 700 and the 800?

Ms Gayler: There is very definitely an incompatibility problem. If Australian public safety agencies were forced into the 800 band then the equipment would be different. It would be more expensive because it is such a small market relative to elsewhere where these products are marketed.

ACTING CHAIR: Is that just an assessment you have made?

Ms Gayler: No, it is advice we have taken from the experts.

ACTING CHAIR: What experts are they?

Ms Gayler: They include Motorola but also police communications experts.

ACTING CHAIR: We had the Federal Police here, as you are aware. They did not raise that as a specific issue. Basically, their position was that there are different views on 700 and 800. They need some high-end broadband, and that is their argument.

Mr Burgess: Without compromising anything, I think it would be safe to say that Australia's police commissioners have taken a view and that view is 700.

ACTING CHAIR: Okay. I just need to know what the technical issues are, and you do not have that.

Ms Gayler: We are not technical experts.

ACTING CHAIR: No, but you are getting expert advice.

Ms Gayler: Yes.

ACTING CHAIR: Where would we get the technical—

Ms Gayler: In my view, the best technical advice that is at arm's length from the commercial carriers would be from the New South Wales Police Force communications head, and secondly from Motorola.

ACTING CHAIR: They are commercial.

Ms Gayler: Yes, but they are not carriers. But they do have an interest, of course, in the devices and the products.

Mr Burgess: You are right, Senator. We have been very conscious that, whenever we had advice given to us by someone who has a commercial interest in this area, we have made sure we have gone and double-checked that advice to ensure that we were not just peddling the line of someone who had a commercial interest.

ACTING CHAIR: Mr Burgess, we will pursue this 700/800 issue as we go on, and you have raised it very starkly. I just keep going back to the five points—the essential elements. If they can be dealt with under the 800 megahertz then do you accept 800?

Mr Burgess: Senator, I suppose I give you the challenge to show us and the rest of the community that the 800 megahertz is the way forward. What we are saying to you today, based on all of the information we have been able to glean from the experts, from policing and from all over the place, is that it is not viable.

ACTING CHAIR: I am sure it is a challenge we will be putting to the other technical experts as we go on. Senator Humphries, do you have any additional questions?

Senator HUMPHRIES: No, I do not.

ACTING CHAIR: Mr Burgess and Ms Gayler, thanks very much. I must say you have done a lot of work on the submissions. It is very professional and well done and very helpful. Whether that is the outcome or not is another matter, but it has been very helpful. Thanks very much.

Mr Burgess: We do not go away easily!

FREEMAN, Ms Elissa, Director of Policy and Campaigns, Australian Communications Consumer Action Network

FRIED, Ms Danielle, Disability Policy Adviser, Australian Communications Consumer Action Network

[10:39]

ACTING CHAIR: I welcome representatives of the Australian Communications Consumer Action Network. Thanks for talking to us today. The committee has received your submission as submission 4. Do you wish to make any amendments or alterations to your submission?

Ms Freeman: Thanks, Senator. I would like to make one correction. In the report attached to our submission, we state that Auslan-English interpreters working at Premier Bligh's emergency-related press conferences were working as volunteers. We now understand that, subsequent to the disaster event, the Queensland government has made arrangements for Deaf Services Queensland to be paid for their services.

ACTING CHAIR: Thank you. Do you wish to make a brief opening statement before we go to questions?

Ms Freeman: Thank you. I would like to begin by acknowledging that we are on the traditional lands of the Ngunawal people. I pay my respects to elders both past and present.

The Australian Communications Consumer Action Network, or ACCAN, is very pleased to have the opportunity to appear before the committee today. ACCAN is a membership based organisation currently comprising over 160 individual and organisational members. Our vision is for available, accessible and affordable communications that enhance the lives of all consumers. We are committed to working towards the guaranteed access to and awareness of emergency management communications. Our submission to this inquiry highlights a number of ways in which we believe access to emergency services and communications can be enhanced. My colleague Ms Fried will briefly mention these.

Ms Fried: The natural disaster events in Queensland which were the impetus for this inquiry demonstrated many of the strengths and, unfortunately, some of the weaknesses of Australia's emergency services and warning systems. ACCAN was particularly concerned about the accessibility of emergency call services and emergency information to people with disability. For example, the flood affected the operations of the Australian Communication Exchange, including the National Relay Service, or NRS—a phone solution for people who are deaf, hearing impaired or speech impaired. Staff were unable to reach or work safely at the call centre, which is in Brisbane. The NRS worked closely with Telstra and the ACMA to ensure that emergency calls via the 106 emergency number could continue, and this meant that people with disability who use a TTY—a specialised telephone with a keyboard—were still able to make emergency calls. However, other people with disabilities throughout Australia—those who rely on the National Relay Service's Speak and Listen and internet relay services and the Australian Communication Exchange's video relay and caption telephony services—were not able to make emergency calls for around 24 hours. All NRS users throughout the country were not able to make calls to the SES either throughout this period.

Another example is access to emergency information. During the floods, we saw the Queensland government take the welcome decision to provide Auslan interpretation for the deaf community at emergency related media conferences. Unfortunately some TV networks initially chose to cut the interpreter out of their broadcast. ACCAN would like to see all state emergency communication strategies include Auslan-English interpreters in public broadcasts and all broadcasters include the interpretation on air. Broadcast emergency information also needs to be open captioned, and any written information on the screen, such as scrolling ticker tape or emergency phone numbers, has to be read out audibly so that viewers who are blind or vision impaired have access to this important information.

Finally, ACCAN believes that mobile location information needs to improve. Callers from landlines normally have their location information conveyed automatically to the emergency call person, and telephone carriers are now obliged to provide some location information about the location of callers from mobile phones to emergency service organisations upon request. The ACMA should specify the time frames and accuracy level of mobile location information required by industry. Thank you.

Senator BILYK: Thank you, and thank you for your submission. As you may have picked up while you have been in the room, it is an area I have got a great interest in. I have already asked the AFP and the Police Federation how they go about dealing with this issue. In your submission, you suggest that access by people with disability to 000 and 106—that is the number used by the keyboard, as I understand it—

Ms Fried: By people who use the TTY; that is right.

Senator BILYK: should be guaranteed at the same level as that enjoyed by direct callers to 000. How is it different at the moment?

Ms Fried: At the moment, callers who use 106 have almost the same guarantees of safety and reliability as callers to 000. For example, if my phone at home is not working because I have not paid my phone bill, I can still call 000. However, if you call 000 via the National Relay Service, you actually have to make a 1800 call first in order to get hold of the National Relay Service.

Senator BILYK: Is that a free call?

Ms Fried: It is a free call, but it is a call that you cannot necessarily make from home if your phone is not working, because 000 has so many safeguards around it. At the National Relay Service end, the current situation is that callers who are calling 000 as opposed to 106 do not get priority assistance. If you call 106 there are relay officers on standby ready to take the call and there are some very clear guidelines about how quickly that call must be answered. If you are calling 000 through the Speak and Listen service, which is the service for people who have significant speech impairments or complex communication needs, or you are using their internet relay service, which is used by people who are deaf, hearing impaired or speech impaired, there is no priority at the National Relay Service end at the moment. We understand that they are working on it.

Senator BILYK: What is your suggestion to overcome those issues?

Ms Fried: We would like to see the emergency call services determination changed to ensure that there are the same safeguards in place for callers who call 000 through any National Relay Service or the Australian communications exchange, as exists currently for 106 and 000 users.

Senator BILYK: Do you see how that can happen?

Ms Fried: We believe there are some technical challenges for internet relay because it would be difficult at the moment to do, although we do not believe it would be insurmountable. It would mean that if your internet service was throttled or disconnected in some way you would still have access to one website, but that would be difficult. Certainly for people who are calling using Speak and Listen we do not believe it is insurmountable. It would mean that the telcos and the National Relay Service would need to work together, probably with the ACMA, to ensure that calls to that 1800 number were available and continued to be available. At the moment, 000 and 106 are two of the three mandated emergency call numbers in Australia, as you would be aware. It may be that callers who need to call Speak and Listen would be able to call 106 instead of a 1800 number. That way they would have those safeguards in place.

Senator BILYK: I am sure that you mentioned in your submission the cost of 1300 numbers. Do you want to explain to the committee your concerns there?

Ms Freeman: That is right. ACCAN has been concerned for some time about the cost of calling 1800 and 13 numbers from mobile phones in particular. A 1800 number is free from a landline and a 13 number is at a low fixed rate that is equivalent to a local phone call from a landline. Unfortunately those protections do not apply as soon as you make either a 1800 or 13 call from your mobile phone. The calls can be very expensive. The ACMA has documented that the call costs can be between 20c and $1.78 per minute plus a flag fall fee. Obviously calls that are made to these numbers can take quite some time, so they can be very expensive calls to make from mobile phones.

Senator BILYK: If there were specific 1800 numbers or 1300 numbers in an emergency is it your suggestion that those specific calls should be at a reduced rate?

Ms Freeman: There is a broader systemic issue around how all 1800 and 13 numbers are priced. Government agencies, emergency service operators and utility companies all operate 13 and 1800 numbers for very good reasons—they want people to access them for free or very little cost.

Senator BILYK: Which is fine from a landline?

Ms Freeman: Yes, but, as we know, fewer and fewer people have landlines and more and more people rely on their mobiles to make calls. We are concerned that the State Emergency Service number is a 13 number. We are also concerned that many insurance companies offer hotlines which are 18 or 13 numbers and they can be very expensive to call in the aftermath of an emergency.

Senator BILYK: You made reference to the Queensland floods and Premier Bligh having an Auslan interpreter beside her and the fact that some commercial, I presume, carriers cut that Auslan person out. You would obviously like to see something done to ensure that that could not happen and I presume, without putting words in your mouth, you would like to see it made more official for it to happen across the board. Am I correct?

Ms Fried: That is right. There are two points. The first point is that we would like to see the provision of Auslan English interpretation being part of any emergency plan strategy at local, state and national level. The second point is that obviously free TV, the ABC and SBS need to then broadcast that Auslan interpreter. We understand that they have committed to that. So then there is the first part, which is that other states and other organisations need to follow the lead that Queensland took earlier.

Senator BILYK: I will ask one more question and then hand over to other people. The Department of Broadband, Communications and the Digital Economy stated in their submission the government's intention to establish a mobile, text based emergency service for deaf, hearing-impaired and speech-impaired Australians. Are you one of these stakeholders engaged in that process?

Ms Fried: Absolutely. We have been very much involved in the lead-up to the announcement and also working closely with other stakeholders and DBCDE as well as the carriers and the National Relay Service in looking through the issues with that. We understand that there are still some significant technical limitations on that. DBCDE are working with us and other stakeholders at looking at implementing a trial of another way that people who are deaf, hearing-impaired or speech-impaired—or indeed, have other disabilities—are able to make calls via their mobile phone. They are looking particularly at a smart phone app at the moment.

Senator BILYK: You have obviously put all your concerns that you have put to us to them as well?

Ms Fried: Yes.

Senator BILYK: Do you have any comments to make in regard to people with intellectual disability and problems they may have in understanding messages, and is there any way we can help resolve that?

Ms Fried: We certainly are ensuring that organisations which represent people with intellectual disabilities are included in any meetings with DBCDE on the implementation of the trial of the smart phone app. We have not made mention of it in our submission.

Senator BILYK: Do you represent those people as well or do you only represent people with hearing and speech disabilities?

Ms Fried: No, no, about a third of our membership is organisations who either represent or serve people with disability. We have been working closely with some organisations that represent people with intellectual disability as well.

ACTING CHAIR: Thank you, Ms Fried. Just before I go to Senator Back, we are looking at the capacity of communication networks and emergency warning systems to deal with emergencies and natural disasters. You have raised one aspect, which is the cost and the availability of people with disabilities using telecommunications devices. There is another aspect as well, isn't there, and that is the capacity for agencies to actually access people with disabilities quickly and effectively in an emergency. Is there a list either at the community, regional or state level of people with disabilities during a disaster?

Ms Fried: No, I understand that there is not at the moment. The Department of Broadband, Communications and the Digital Economy are currently reviewing access to telecommunications for people with disability, older Australians and people with chronic illness as part of the terms of reference, as there is a question put out the community about whether such a list would be useful, who would be on it, how would privacy be maintained and so on.

ACTING CHAIR: So you have to balance privacy with the lives of people. What is your view? Is privacy more important than being able to save people in an emergency?

Ms Fried: I believe it needs to be an opt-in list. I do not think we have had a chance to develop strong thoughts on this.

Ms Freeman: No. I think the line of questioning you have is entirely reasonable to consider. Our approach has been to empower those people to be able to contact emergency services by ensuring that they can make that emergency call or contact the state emergency services. That is very much the focus of our submission and our report. **ACTING CHAIR:** So they are treated like everyone else in the community?

Ms Freeman: That is exactly right. We hear from the community that they want to be able to make those calls in an emergency situation.

ACTING CHAIR: Do you have to balance that against some I suppose tough love and say: 'You have got a disability. You may not be able to get to a telephone, so you should be on a list so that emergency services can go straight to your house as a priority'?

Ms Fried: Again, we would be happy to get back to you once we have had some further consultation with the community. The message we have received so far, as Ms Freeman said, is that people want to be treated like other

people and want the opportunity to make the same kinds of calls and have the same access to information that everybody else has. In our submission we have noted that as well Auslan interpreters on TV there should be more information available on the web, emergency information needs to be open captioned for people who are deaf or hearing impaired, and information on the screen visually also needs to be available verbally for people with vision impairments or who are blind.

ACTING CHAIR: Can you come back to us in terms of what we are looking at—that is, a warning system—when you have given consideration to community based warning systems for people with disabilities and how the community can assist in an emergency?

Ms Fried: We are happy to take that on notice.

Senator BACK: I congratulate you on your submission. I think you have raised issues of critical importance which otherwise might have been overlooked or not given due consideration. The questions to date indicate that. In the whole process of emergency management there are four phases: planning, preparation, response and recovery. This committee in a sense is undertaking the first of those—that is, the planning phase for the next one. Your submission is directed at the third of them, the response phase. The better we do the planning now then the better the outcomes will be the next time there is such an emergency. Obviously the best outcomes occur when, as part of the preparation for a major disaster, we can contact and put in a safe place the three groups you have identified: those with disabilities, older Australians and those with illnesses. What recommendations would you give this committee to enhance the planning phase of emergency and disaster management for disabled people in particular?

Ms Freeman: My colleague, Ms Fried, works very closely with emergency service operators and in particular with 000 information to the broader community. Just recently we were involved in quite intensive lobbying to make their website accessible for people who use screen readers. That is a very small example of how you can make information accessible and therefore increase the community's preparedness when there is an emergency situation. Our challenge to you and the broader emergency services community is to think about those principles of universal design right at the very beginning when you are putting your education materials together, setting up your websites and figuring out how people are going to be able to access emergency services. That is at a very high level, but thinking about the needs of the most vulnerable consumers is going to be really powerful.

Senator BACK: What resources do you have to educate those likely to be mostly at risk—for example, educate them towards a philosophy whereby they are prepared to move earlier than perhaps a more able person or people in the community, accepting that there could well be false alarms? Those with responsibility for managing an emergency might identify them as being more at risk and want them to be evacuated from an area at a time when it might not be apparent from looking out of the window or listening to the radio that they should be moved for their own safety.

Ms Fried: Are you speaking specifically about people with physical disability?

Senator BACK: No, I am speaking of anybody who might be at higher level of risk than the wider community once an emergency disaster actually does commence.

Ms Fried: I think this goes back to what Ms Freeman was saying before about making sure that websites are—

Senator BACK: But do you have the resources? This is my question. I understand the tools. I am asking: have you got the resources or should this committee be addressing itself to the adequacy of resources so that you can get these messages to those who are vulnerable, particularly those with disabilities?

Ms Fried: I am not sure that it is a question of resources. It does go back to this idea of universal design. People with disability make up about one-fifth of our population. That percentage is probably going to get higher and higher as the population ages, so any education needs to build in the fact that 20 per cent of the population have this issue. Not all of those people are at particularly higher risk than other people. I think you would probably find, for example, that people who are deaf or hearing impaired would say that as long as they have the information that everybody else has they can make the same decisions and get out at the same time as everybody does.

Senator BACK: The reason I ask, as one who has had responsibility in managing emergencies, is that those in nursing homes and those in hospitals are readily identified, and very early in the piece you make decisions in relation to them. But the group that you are identifying to this committee are those who might otherwise fall under the radar. That is the reason I asked the question. If you look at recent disasters, they are actually quite interesting. The Toowoomba flood and the Grantham-Murphys Creek floods, as I understand it, really came almost without warning; therefore, the opportunity to alert people early and move them early was almost lost. Whereas, for

example, the Brisbane River, Cyclone Yasi and indeed the Black Saturday fires did fall into the latter category, where advanced warning should have been sufficient to actually identify and contact. Perhaps I am asking: in that phase, in the preparation phase before we actually get into having to respond, is there capacity for some within the community to be more proactive in alerting people with known disabilities? Is that the way we should be planning for the future?

Ms Freeman: We may need to come back to some of these details. Some of this is certainly veering outside our area of expertise. But if I could come back to one point that we raise in our submission, which is about the need to have emergency information in accessible formats—and I think this does come into the planning and preparation stage—our submission applauds the use of Auslan interpreters, and we do that for very good reason. If you are talking to the community in their first language they are much more likely to understand the information that is being presented to them. Equally, if there is information that is presented visually, a vision impaired community is not going to get that information. It needs to be aural as well. There is something about building that universal design principle into emergency management processes very early on that I think is going to again empower some of the communities that we are concerned about. We may come back to you, Senator, if we have any further comments on that point.

Senator BACK: Sure. I ask the question in the context of networks that exist already. For example, Neighbourhood Watch exists in both rural and urban communities. But particularly in rural communities, where people tend to know each other and actually talk to each other, it is likely that people may well know people who are disabled and may be able to be that proactive person I speak of. I ask the question—and it is not a question I will ask of you, but I will ask for your response and I will be asking it to others this morning—because around Australia now, particularly in rural Australia, there is a concern that we have become so enamoured of centralised command, control and coordination that what we have actually done, deliberately or inadvertently, is put to one side the expertise of local, usually volunteer but by no means unprofessional, people who have always undertaken this role. They are the ones in a local community who actually do know those who might be disabled and those who might be aged or whatever. Is that something that your organisation has noticed or is it something completely outside your sphere of influence?

Is that something that your organisation has noticed or is it something completely outside your sphere of influence?

Ms Freeman: I think I would have to say that is outside our sphere of responsibility when it comes to advocating for communications consumers.

Senator BACK: Sure. It is a risk that you descend into when you centralise to the extent that you disempower those at the local level. My final question is simply on a personal basis. I have some friends, a married couple in Melbourne, who are both profoundly mute and deaf. They were victims of Rh incompatibility as children. Can you tell me what sorts of technologies would be available to that couple to alert them to a natural disaster or an emergency?

Ms Fried: If I can just go back to the comment you made earlier about communities having knowledge, and this probably relates to your final question, as well as looking at communities geographically we can also look at communities by disability group and by language too. I think it is important to acknowledge the work that disability service organisations and disability organisations do in emergencies. For example, and this possibly relates to your friends in Victoria, my understanding is that Vicdeaf, the Victorian Deaf Society, provided information in Auslan on its website about the Victorian bushfires so that people who are deaf Auslan users in Victoria could have access to that. I am not sure if that is funded. It would be great to see that kind of proactive work being done and being funded around the country via people that understand their community, whether it is geographically based or based on the language they use or the disability group they are in. In regard to you friends in Victoria, are they sign language users?

Senator BACK: Yes, they both are.

Ms Fried: There is that kind of information. It is becoming more and more common now that people will use the internet to get information in sign language. They have got access to TTYs. As we said in our submission, we do have some concerns about the way that disability equipment programs currently work and we are making a submission to the DBCDE review on that. There is internet relay and, as we also discussed in our submission, there is currently a trial of a video relay service. For example, for many people who are deaf and were born and raised in Australia their first langauge is Auslan and English is very much a second language. For many deaf people their English is not sufficient to use the National Relay Service because it relies on either written or spoken English. The video relay service that is currently in trial enables somebody to sit in front of a computer with a webcam and sign. Then the interpreter would call 000, the SES, the hospital or wherever needs to be

called. That is a really wonderful use of technology that your friends could use. But, as we say, that is currently not a very safe or secure method of calling 000 or SES.

Senator BOYCE: I have some follow-up questions. Senator Back raised the issue of the somewhat ad hoc nature of people being advised at the moment. There are community people who might know. There is a centralised group. Do you feel that everyone who needs to be advised in an outside-the-norm way currently is being advised of disasters or dangers?

Ms Fried: I do not believe so. As Ms Freeman said, our area is specifically about telecommunications, broadband and so on, so we cannot really comment. I know that the NCID talked about doorknocking and things like that. That is really outside our area of expertise. Without Auslan interpreters on every emergency update that is broadcast on TV and on the net, without open captions, without voice-over of text based information for people who are blind or vision impaired, that information could not be getting through to people. We certainly welcome the upcoming phase 2 of the SMS emergency system. That is going to mean that people who are deaf or hearing impaired have better access to emergency information. We are aware that there are some problems with the landline based emergency alert. If an emergency alert comes through to a home where they use a TTY, rather than a regular phone, they will not get that alert. So I would have to say, no, not currently, although it is improving.

Senator BOYCE: As you said, your area of expertise is telecommunications, but there would also be people with other disabilities, such as an intellectual disability or just the inability to move themselves without assistance. What if anything can telecommunications offer them, and if nothing have you thought at all about what else should be happening there?

Ms Fried: I do not think we can answer the second part of your question, but certainly we are working with DBCDE to ensure that the SMS emergency or smartphone app is not simply going to be for people who are deaf, hearing-impaired or speech impaired, who traditionally have been the focus for that. We want to make sure that people who have complex communication needs, dexterity issues, people who have difficulty making a phone call because it is physically difficult for them to do so, even people with psychiatric disabilities are included in that. We will certainly talk to that in the submission that we will be making to DBCDE on access to telecommunications for people with disability.

Senator HUMPHRIES: I want to understand the point you make in your submission about the call and no response problem. If a person has a hearing impediment they would presumably use the 106 number to call emergency services. I take it that the problem with having to confirm that you are on the line by pressing 55 does not arise with respect to the 106 number, is that the case?

Ms Fried: No, it doesn't. The problem unfortunately is that there are many situations where a person who is deaf or hearing impaired does not have access to 106. The 106 number can be used only on a TTY, which is a landline phone. If you are out and about you cannot use 106. Many deaf and hearing-impaired people if they are out and about when an emergency happens call 000 from their mobile phone. The number of people in the general community who call 000 from a mobile is increasing, it is the same for people who are deaf or hearing impaired—they want that same access. The other issue is that, with the advent of internet relay, fewer and fewer deaf and hearing-impaired people actually have a TTY in their home. They will pick up a phone, any phone, and call 000. Part of the problem is a lack of education. People in the community, both deaf people and hearing-impaired people, do not realise that this 55 system is in place. Ideally, yes, they would be using another method, but unfortunately this is still quite common.

Senator HUMPHRIES: What would a deaf person be doing making the call? If they call someone, they cannot hear what is being said to them, so why would they call in the first place?

Ms Fried: That is right. It is a last resort. Because people think that it is still the way it used to be. Until a few years ago if you picked up a phone and dialled 000 and were then unable to speak for whatever reason, you might be under duress or you could not speak, you would be connected to the police. That no longer happens. Because of call minimisation, which is absolutely needed, there needs to be a way of minimising non-genuine calls, the 55 system was implemented, but most of the community are not aware of it. We have certainly spoken to deaf and hearing-impaired people, and they are not aware of it.

Senator HUMPHRIES: Given that there is a huge problem with people making accidental calls, which is the reason for the 55 problem, I cannot see how you could solve the problem. If a deaf person rings 000 and someone is talking to them but cannot hear them, I do not know what you can technically do to solve that problem.

Ms Fried: Part of the resolution is education—letting the community know that this issue exists. When I say the community, the deaf community is fairly easy to contact—it is fairly small and it is cohesive. Hearing-impaired people, as I said before, are a very large group in our population; they are spread out and they are

difficult to contact. There actually needs to be universal education and training about this. The second thing about this is that it may be possible that people can be taught that at a certain point in discussions with the emergency call person at Telstra they make some kind of noise, wait 10 seconds and then dial 55. Hopefully, this is going to become less and less of an issue as internet relay, video relay, caption telephony and either an SMS and/or a smartphone option for mobile phone calls becomes more available. Then people will not have to use this last resort of dialling 000 and hoping for the best.

Senator HUMPHRIES: I am not sure what the point of making a noise on the phone would be because presumably if a deaf person is in an emergency they would ring and say, 'I am in a burning building,' or 'I have fallen and I need rescuing,' or something, and they would convey their message—

Ms Fried: They may, if they can.

Senator HUMPHRIES: But return communication would not be possible anyway, would it?

Ms Fried: That is right.

Senator HUMPHRIES: So what is the point of staying on the line? You convey your message and then, in a sense, you would have to hang up, wouldn't you?

Ms Fried: Part of the issue is that you may not be able to convey a message. Many deaf people do not speak English.

Senator HUMPHRIES: So what is the point of ringing 000 if you cannot hear them and they cannot hear you?

Ms Fried: Because they believe that the situation is as it used to be, which was if you called 000 and stayed on the line, a police vehicle would be sent to help you.

Senator HUMPHRIES: But that cannot reasonably occur, given that so many people ring 000 accidentally. You would have police cars fanning out across the community hundreds of times every day to mobile phone calls that were not actually an emergency.

Ms Fried: That is right, and we certainly are not saying that this 55 method, or any call-minimisation method, should be ended. We are saying that there needs to be some systemic changes in place so that deaf or hearing-impaired people know either that they cannot call 000 at all or that there are some ways to get around this. For example, you mentioned before people making a noise. The emergency call person has told us that if there is any kind of vocal noise happening at the other end of the phone they will assume that it is a genuine call and, even though they do not know the nature of the emergency, they will connect to the police and the police will then make the call on whether it is genuine or not. So there may be some ways around it.

Senator HUMPHRIES: All right. Perhaps you might like to think about what that might be. It is not clear to me how you would solve that problem. If we are going to recommend something we would need to know what it was that we should be dealing with. You might want to take that on notice.

Just finally, you mentioned the question about caller location identification, which is available for landlines but which is not, at this stage—at least, universally—available to people on mobiles. Do you know if there is a technical solution to that problem? Is it possible for present systems to identify the location of a user of mobile phone?

Ms Fried: My understanding is that we are in what is called phase 1 of mobile location information. Should an emergency service organisation need to know the location of somebody in an emergency and they are unable to ask them directly, they can then approach the carrier and ask for that information. But at the moment the carrier cannot provide a very accurate picture of where the person is. Under phase 1 they are obliged to provide as accurate a position as possible as quickly as possible. Phase 2—which I understand they are working on, trying to resolve the technical issues—needs to be much more accurate and it probably will need to be in real time. My understanding is that in the US, Canada and the UK this is already in place, so there should not be any unresolvable technical problems with that.

Senator McKENZIE: Just to follow up on that point: is it not dependent on whether your show location button is pressed on your mobile that the carrier will be able to identify where the holder of the mobile is? Or can they just override that anyway?

Ms Fried: My understanding is that it does not matter. It can be used with mobile phones that have GPS and mobile phones that do not have GPS. Obviously, if there is GPS and it is turned on, that will mean that the location is more accurate.

Senator McKENZIE: But under the scenario that you just described a carrier can locate any mobile phone?

Ms Fried: Yes, but it is not very accurate—it is not pinpointable.

Senator BILYK: On the street corner!

Ms Fried: It depends very much where you are. If you are in the middle of the CBD in Sydney it is going to be more accurate than it is if you are in Broken Hill.

ACTING CHAIR: Before we finish up, TTY—telephone typewriter or text phone; you have mentioned that several times—are the emergency services equipped with TTY-compatible equipment on their side?

Ms Fried: No, they are not. All calls made with a TTY to emergency services go through the National Relay Service. The National Relay Service provider is an emergency call person in the same way that Telstra is. So a relay officer takes the call at the National Relay Service and then relays the call through to the emergency service organisation.

ACTING CHAIR: So they have TTY?

Ms Fried: The National Relay Service has a TTY or a TTY computer that acts like a TTY and then they relay the call. The deaf person would type: 'I am at 5 Pitt Street. My husband is having a heart attack.' The relay officer would read that out to the emergency service organisation and would then type back to the deaf person what the emergency service organisation says.

ACTING CHAIR: Thanks Ms Fried and Ms Freeman for your assistance this morning. It has been very helpful.

Proceedings suspended from 11:20 to 11:34

AYRE, Mr Michael, Acting Director, Northern Territory Fire and Rescue Service

CHIVELL, Mr Anthony Robert, Manager, Communications and Electronic Support Section, Northern Territory Police, Fire and Emergency Services

CORNISH, Superintendent Colin, Superintendent, Communications Branch, South Australian Police

DAVIES, Mr Peter, Director, Northern Territory Emergency Service

EDWARDS, Mr Andrew, Director, Information Communication and Technology, New South Wales State Emergency Service

GATES, Mr Tony, Director, Operations, Telco Authority, New South Wales Government

HAMON, Mr Grant, Manager, Community Fire Safety, Northern Territory Fire and Rescue Service

HANSON, Mr Mark, Director, Public Safety Communications, Government of South Australia

MCDONALD, Mr Bruce Neil, Chief Superintendent, New South Wales Rural Fire Service

PLACE, Mr David, Chief Executive, South Australian Fire and Emergency Services Commission

Evidence from Mr Ayre, Mr Chivell, Mr Davies and Mr Hamon was taken via teleconference—

ACTING CHAIR: I welcome the next witnesses. Thank you for talking to us today. As state government officers, you will not be asked to give opinions on matters of policy, though this does not preclude questions asking for explanations of policy or factual questions about when and how policies were adopted. The committee has received your submissions as submissions Nos 5, 9 and 41. I understand you do not wish to make any amendments or alterations to your submissions. I invite you to make an opening statement before we go to questions. Given that we have three groups, I ask that you make the opening statements brief.

Mr Place: If I go first, perhaps the others can modify theirs to suit. I think we have crossed most of the spectrum, so I am hoping I will capture a lot of it first up. Thank you for the opportunity to meet with you today. Our submission to the inquiry highlights not just the importance of looking at telecommunications and power infrastructure but the fact that we also need to take into account the end-to-end information processes and the governance and standards affecting the responsibilities and practice of emergency management and response agencies.

There seems to be an increasing expectation upon governments to provide the perfect information at the perfect time and in a manner that is perfectly tailored for each individual recipient. This is clearly not achievable and certainly not sustainable. If we are not careful, we will create an expectation that all responsibility rests with government, which is not in the best interests of community resilience. Resilience is achieved through a partnership between all levels of government, the community and business.

In the incident information management environment, we believe that the flow of information needs to be examined from the point of view of not only the output to the community through the variety of tools that are available to use but how we more effectively use the information and intelligence from the incident scene and its translation into meaningful messages that our communities can use for their safety. The operability and capability of information systems to operate inter- and intra-agency and outwards to our emergency partners—that is, the media and the community—is a key risk. It is through the use of a suite of communications tools that interoperability is allowed to occur and the vital safety messages can go out. Therefore, an integrated information management architecture is a desirable outcome within each jurisdiction, and potentially nationally. This is not always the normal environment and failure of systems to interface with others can result in time delays through issues such as duplication, rewriting warning scripts, manual processes instead of automated, and approval processes within and between agencies. Governance is critical for emergency warning systems, and the continued need to meet the expectations of our communities must be driven through effective governance structures, including development of best practice guidelines and standards for agencies to follow.

With an increasing population, diverse communities and a genuine growing expectation of real-time incident information and warnings, it needs to be recognised that our systems must improve at a similar rate. This includes our communication networks being able to support emergency service initiatives. As I have said, the community expect to receive up-to-date, accurate information when they are faced with an emergency. With new media such

as Twitter and online news sites, the community expect immediate answers to any query they may have. There is a shift required from viewing the community as recipients of information to the community being an integral part of our information processes.

Our communication networks and systems are the backbone of this process, from information from the incident ground right through the chain of command to the distribution of messages to our communities. Often these are the communication networks that are first impacted by an incident, thereby reducing the number of avenues emergency services have to deliver vital safety information and receive intelligence from the community. In light of the recent spate of emergencies and disasters, there is an increased need to reinforce the message that there could be possible failures in communication networks and that multiple information streams and communication methods should be monitored. We need to continue to provide honest advice that, at times, communication networks may fail and that the community needs strategies for all possibilities, including pre-prepared plans for action. Many of the warning systems used by police and emergency services in South Australia and other jurisdictions rely heavily on electricity. Power blackouts also impact on operational response efforts by our emergency services in that voice and data networks may be impacted. While many of the systems have back up to keep them running during power outages there are limits as to how long batteries and generators can run.

Without communication networks restored swiftly after the emergency it is virtually impossible to know which members of a community require assistance and for recovery efforts to commence. Community resilience is likely to be reduced if critical communication networks are not restored quickly, enabling community rehabilitation to occur.

ACTING CHAIR: Thank you. Mr Gates?

Mr Gates: I would just like to support that. I think it is important to understand that we live in a far more complex environment today, both technically and operationally. Once there was just Telstra and copper; now we have a vast variety of means. It is not just copper, it is optic fibre, it is microwave, there is Twitter, there is Facebook and the internet. There is a whole range of technologies so that we have the choice of a lot more and we have to be very careful about their availability and how we use them. Operationally, I think it is fair to say that if you take the 20 years between Ash Wednesday and the 1994 fires in Sydney there was only really one other emergency Ash Wednesday which was a multi-agency event, so that was three events in 20 years.

Since 1994 we have had Thredbo, the hailstorms in Sydney in 1999, there were fires in Sydney in 2001, there were the Canberra bushfires in 2003, there was the Kangaroo Island fire in South Australia, there were floods in 2007, there was Victoria in 2009 and, of course, the floods and storms we had down the east coast in 2010. It is clear that the number of emergencies involving interagency and interjurisdictional operations is increasing.

I would like to emphasise what South Australia said: modern technology depends on power, so power is becoming a critical issue. Because we have that more complex technical environment we, as people who respond to emergencies at the state and territory level, need to be able to have a clear picture of the status of telecommunications networks. We understand they operate in a commercial environment but they need to be able to give us a clear picture of the state of the networks so that we can tell our people in the field how they can communicate.

There has been a lot of focus on alternative technologies, particularly the alerting system. We see that as really important, but we have to remember that not all parts of Australia and not everybody is internet savvy or has a mobile phone. There is still a really important role for the traditional ways of getting to people: radio and television; and telling people through education systems to have a battery driven commercial radio and to know who to listen to is really important.

Because it is a complex environment we need to make sure we are getting in at the education level and that the community understands exactly what to do in an emergency. I think that in South Australia there is an increasing expectation on governments to respond, and as the number of emergencies increases that is going to challenge us more and more.

Finally, as I said, we need access to systems for people, we need access to spectrum for governments so that we can run our radio networks and we need access to spectrum for our data networks as well. Failing that—and you will hear a lot about that discussion around the data services—we need access to dedicated parts of the commercial network because, while the commercial networks prove very effective, they are prone to congestion and emergency services need to be able to communicate in emergency situations.

ACTING CHAIR: Thanks, Mr Gates. Mr Davies, do you have an opening statement?

Mr Davies: Yes. We would like to agree with the previous two statements, and go on to say in brief that in fact the big problem we face up here now is not so much getting a message through to people any more but actually getting to influence their behaviour.

If I take the example of Darwin, we know that 24 hours out people will start shopping because the shops close and start preparing for cyclones. The real problem in Darwin is not that food or materials are unavailable and the shops are empty, it is just that we cannot distribute them in time. The challenge, therefore, is how we stretch out that time frame. The use of social media starts to help in this regard and we are working in that direction. But with it comes a huge overhead in workload. The second issue is with the number of different types of ways of talking to people nowadays, coordination of these messages is very difficult. For instance, with Emergency Alert where you send SMSs to mobile phones, due to the length of an SMS, the problem is not so much getting the SMS out there, although that has its own issues, it is how to get the radios coordinated with the SMS so that when people turn on the radio having been alerted by an SMS they get the right messages. All this coordination takes time and unfortunately the public want instant communications nowadays.

I note with SMSs, they do not wake people up at night. One of the big weaknesses in the whole system at the moment is if a tsunami comes in after dark then there is a very good likelihood that we will not be able to wake people up and alert them to move. This is probably one of the bigger holes in our alerting system as we speak. Thank you.

Senator HUMPHRIES: I want to take up with all three jurisdictions here the last issue raised by Mr Davies about narrowcasting an emergency message into communities affected by cyclone, fire or whatever the issue might be. Could each of you comment on what you feel have been the failings of the Emergency Alert system. Mr Davies has made reference to people being asleep, for example. I understand there is also an issue with people having a phone registered to a particular address but being somewhere else at the time that the emergency call comes through. Could you describe in practical terms what that has meant in particular emergency situations and the failings or shortcomings of that scheme.

Mr Gates: I will get Mr McDonald and Mr Edwards who have operational experience to address that. I make the point that after the September 11 attacks in 2001, the President of the United States mandated that there be a system for determining location of mobile phones. An inquiry to address that was held in 2005, I think, called 'location, location, location'. The committee is perhaps aware of it. It needs to be updated because being able to track mobile phones is an issue.

Mr McDonald: The Emergency Alert system has two functions. It dials landline telephones based on the service address—that is, the address that the telephone was physically connected to. That is reasonably successful. For mobile phones it is based on the billing address which for me would be my organisation and not my residence. Some of the limitations are that unless the alerting polygon is drawn around the business address, I will not get a message no matter where I am.

As an organisation we have only used Emergency Alert on two occasions. It has had reasonable success, but we also believe that Emergency Alert is not the panacea to all ills. There needs to be a mixture of Facebook, Twitter, local media, community doorknocking, community meetings et cetera. Our experience has shown that different solutions work differently in different communities. You cannot take one of the suite of tools and isolate it. You must use all of the tools and whatever is appropriate for the best community outcome.

Senator HUMPHRIES: Have there been practical examples of Emergency Alert not reaching affected people in a particular situation in New South Wales where problems were caused to a community by virtue of their not being reached?

Mr Edwards: Between 1 July last year and the time we made our submission, we have been a very large user of the Emergency Alert system, with 38,000 alerting messages sent out to communities during the floods that occurred both along the east coast and in the west of New South Wales. With regard to your question, I do not know of an example where it has occurred. However, given the number of messages that we would have sent and the likelihood of an instance occurring, it probably would have. Again, I am not aware of an exact example. I support Bruce's comment in that it is a really good system. It is another system in a suite of tools that we have to alert communities. We would support the ongoing development of the Emergency Alert system to address the issues that you have identified.

Mr Davies: We have only used Emergency Alert three times, but on these occasions there have been some issues. First of all, there were people who did not get the message in time, they believed. Principally this was for a bushfire where the fire has to be going for a certain period of time before it gets to a scale for you to start issuing the messages. People who were close to the origins of the fire did not get the message in the timeframe because of

those issues. Second, there were people who got the messages but were outside the area at the time and, because they got the message, moved in towards the fire zone, which created problems. Depending on what your intent for the message is, the ability to only target people within a certain radius or to target the people who own properties within that radius are both very important. For instance, you might want to be able to influence people not to go back into a fire zone and therefore you might want to send to mobile phones by billing address. The whole thing of using Emergency Alert is really quite complex, particularly when you only have 234 characters, I think it is, for an SMS, and therefore the message has to be linked to the official message going over the radio. As I have said, that coordination issue can prove quite difficult, particularly when you have not foreseen the type of emergency.

Mr Place: We have used the Emergency Alert product on numerous occasions, once for flood but mostly for bushfire related small- to medium-sized incidents. It has proved to be an effective tool once the decision is made and the message is ready to go. There have been some minor issues, but it has been mainly successful. We have linked it to the program we call Alert SA. We send a message out and that message, which I think is 160 characters on the SMS screen, is linked to an interactive voice recording and our websites. We have a state emergency crisis call centre which we are scaling up in a more sustainable way.

We have an illustrative document which goes to one of my opening statements. I will talk through this as I think it reflects some of Mr Davies' concerns too. It ends up being an hourglass as there is a whole range of inputs—

ACTING CHAIR: Mr Place, are you tabling this document?

Mr Place: Yes, please. If you look at the top you will see there are numerous inputs into emergency agencies. In South Australia usually the hazard leader takes initial responsibility: the Country Fire Service for fire, the SES for a storm or flood. The inputs are numerous and they are formal and informal. In fact, the Country Fire Service guys in a reasonable mid-country location in South Australia have told me if you can get some really accurate intelligence from the field by getting senior volunteer fire-fighters into the field to give you an update you are probably looking at about an hour before you can absolutely guarantee the intelligence is pretty good for where the fire is going, the rate of spread and other issues. In the middle of this hourglass you take all that information.

We have numerous systems, sometimes within agencies and certainly between agencies. We have different incident management systems within agencies. We have different methods of capturing information and creating the templates for the warning messages. We have different processes for getting approvals for those messages to go out. Eventually, through the different suite of tools, comes the output. This is what I mentioned earlier. From the community's perspective, we need to look at this from the bottom up for the effectiveness of these messages. In terms of time, we have a very complex system. As Mr Davies said, if you are trying to put a message out three-quarters of an hour after the fire has gone through it is a waste of time. In practice, if you look at where this turns into an hourglass down the bottom, people start to turn to the more informal processes—local gossip, for example, may well be where they get their information— because they are craving that information and they are not getting it through the formal channels. So, while there is a lot of work to do in a lot of areas here, we think one of the things that would be a short-term gain would be to agree to things within jurisdictions, and perhaps with national implications, for common IT architecture. There are products with which you can write the message once and it can go to many different media—to voice recordings, to website messages, to SMS alerts et cetera. We should aim for more commonality across governance processes and policies about how we do this, similar templates et cetera. In that, we would like to examine the use of social media as intelligence-gathering tools rather than just as media for output.

Senator HUMPHRIES: The one thing which all of these methods of communication suffer from—except when you have warnings through something like a siren system which most communities, I suspect, do not have—is that they do not operate when people are not using devices. If they are having a bath or they are asleep or whatever, all of these methods fail when that sort of situation arises. I understand that the Yellow Bird ALERT technology is one that does overcome that problem. It is based on radios and has the capacity to turn the radios on when they are not in use, or to override the broadcast of whatever is being listened to at that time, to broadcast an emergency warning. I notice that the Northern Territory submission makes reference to Yellow Bird. Have the other jurisdictions seen trialling of Yellow Bird? Do you have an impression at this stage of whether it is a technology which may fill that gap?

Mr Place: We have seen some trials. I think it potentially requires another communication infrastructure process to get it out there in locations where they cannot put their transmitters on existing towers. But it seems impressive. It is another tool in the suite of tools. I think what we are also saying here is that we cannot rely on this pipeline—there needs to be more emphasis on community self-reliance. It seems as though, when we take a step forward with each new product, the community takes a step back and just expects it to happen. I think there

is a very concerted behavioural change issue. This is a partnership. We can supply some of the infrastructure in government. We can supply some of the education and the knowledge and the tools to do it but, without a partner from the community, we cannot respond to everywhere. We cannot have a fire truck or a message out on every corner on every day when there is a major incident.

Senator HUMPHRIES: This is the problem, is it not? In a given community, there could be 50 different ways people are expecting to find out what is going on, so there is no one standard set of ways that people can find out. Some might be going to their phones, some might be going to their computers, some are asking their neighbours and so on.

Mr Gates: I think there is an important point that South Australia make, and Andrew and Bruce referred to it as well, about the mix of technologies. Looking at the emergency alerting system at night, if you can target a landline, you have a good chance of waking people up. That message, to pick up what Northern Territory said, might simply be, 'Hey, wake up and listen to your radio.' What the Northern Territory said about the timing of that message is important, but then South Australia also said part of the message might be, 'Check your neighbours.' Andrew made a comment to me while you were asking that question about the overreliance on technology. Technology is really important and we have to use it, but, to be effective, we have to rely on some good old community values. People need to be able to talk to one another. As much as I hate to say it, if this increasing trend in the number of emergencies continues, there is a limit to how government can respond. We have to respond as best we can, but the community has to respond as best they can too. Maybe we need to get back to basics and do some basic emergency training exercises and emergency education so that people know what to do in an emergency—who to ring, what to listen to and how to react.

Mr McDonald: That takes us down the path of community engagement. We believe that, beyond community education, there is community engagement, which will build the resilience of communities. As I said before, different communities react differently to different triggers. It is about working with those communities and understanding what their triggers are, what systems they are going to use and making that appropriate. What is appropriate for a rural community may not work in a built-up urban community, and different processes will have different reactions.

ACTING CHAIR: Is there any input on this from the Northern Territory delegation witnesses, who are on teleconference?

Mr Davies: I think in my original thing I spoke about the need to regard emergency warning as how we are going to go about influencing people's behaviour. I think up until now broadly we have looked at getting messages across when, in fact, the actual aim is to influence people's behaviour. Consequently with different ways we can now get messages across in combination and we probably have more chance of doing that influencing certainly at a technical level. But I do not think enough work has been done on how to go about getting people to do stuff. Particularly up here in the territory when we have quite a few false alarms when cyclones come in close and warning fatigue is becoming a bigger issue, we have got to be very careful in how we go about putting our warnings out to make sure this warning fatigue does not get to the stage that people will not take any notice of a warning anymore. Hence I think there is a lot of work to be done in an intellectual sense in working our way through those sorts of issues.

Senator HUMPHRIES: Coming back to Yellow Bird, has New South Wales been exposed to that technology and have you formed a view about it?

Mr Gates: Andrew and I are aware of it. I do not know if Bruce is aware of it. I do not know of any trials in New South Wales but certainly we will have a look at it as soon as we get back.

Mr McDonald: My view on that is that where we have the ability to access common technologies, such as a telephone system which might wake somebody up, we are better off using that available technology rather than mandating a specific brand of technology that has to be picked up by people along the way.

Senator HUMPHRIES: I do not think anyone is talking about mandating one set of technology, rather adding it to the suite of technologies available. If you are one of the increasing number of households that do not have a landline anymore it is not going to be much good to you, is it?

Mr McDonald: That is true.

Senator BACK: Gentlemen, this committee is well aware of the fact that emergency management is a state and territory issue but we also want to report to the parliament on the adequacy of where we are, and I think the wider community nationally has that expectation. I am going to put to you the view of the need for communications technology for three areas: those involved in the incident, the community and, thirdly, governments. I am going to ask for your response as to where you think we are. I am sorry the question is a bit

long. These are what I see—and you might comment and correct me or add to them—as being what we need by way of communications technology at the incident level. The first is a seamless real-time communications system in and out between all of the services who are involved in an emergency with some hierarchy of response. The second is that the system not be overwhelmed—or fail—by a wealth of communications traffic. The third is that users are skilled in the communications protocol, so they do not stuff it up or interfere with others, and that it be robust across distance. I have not put in, but I will, confidentiality, of course, particularly for police and related parties. At the community level, as has been said by Mr Davies eloquently, the communications technology should be effective in its ability to communicate clear, accurate and timely information to an affected community who might then act on it. The next I put to you in terms of governments, both state/territory and federal. It should be affordable. The question I have for you all is: where are we and what do we have to do to actually get to where we need to be so the community does feel protected?

Mr Gates: I will start by answering the first question. I will not try to answer them all because I am quite sure my colleagues will be able to add value. In terms of a seamless communications system, clearly we have got that with the mobile telephone and the landline network and Optus, Telstra and Vodafone can all talk to each other. So we have got that, but what we do not have at a national level is a radio network. In 2009 COAG agreed to an interoperability framework by 2020 and we are working our way through that. We have currently got a number of agencies from three governments around this table all on a similar radio network and we are working to make that network interoperable. We want a situation, as we have in New South Wales and the ACT now, where we can send New South Wales firefighters into the ACT and crossing the jurisdictional boundary does not mean they need to change radio networks.

Senator BACK: Mr Gates, can I clarify an incident some years ago now on a fire ground where the police were controlling road access. The incident controller had VHF radio; the police did not. The incident controller was not able to direct the police to close off access to a road. A person went down the road and there was a tragic outcome. My question is: on fire grounds, for example, do we yet have a commonality of communications so that fire authorities, SES, police and anybody else who is on that fire ground involved in the incident have seamless communications? That is included in the question—I am sorry I did not make it clear enough.

Mr McDonald: The police, no, but for the other emergency response agencies in New South Wales, yes, through what they call the emergency service organisation channels in a single radio provider. There is a suite of 20 channels available for interaction between those agencies. The police stand outside of that at the moment, so—

Senator BACK: So in my scenario in New South Wales, an incident controller still could not contact a police officer at a road and indicate whether he wants access blocked or not?

Mr McDonald: That is correct.

Mr Gates: That would be done by swapping radios not integral to the system.

Supt Cornish: It is a bit of a different arrangement in South Australia. We have a government radio network which all agencies use and interface with. It is a very simple matter for us to set up an interoperable talk group amongst all the agencies at any scene so they can talk to each other. This is not used as a despatching process but as a management silo breakdown process to get information across all of the agencies. That access is managed by the South Australian police communications centre. I think it is 20 agencies that now use the government radio network and everyone can access it and set that interagency talk group up very quickly.

I was here when you are talking about broadband earlier, but I would just like to add that voice radio will always be the primary method of communication because of its immediacy. That is something we have to carry forward. We will always need to make sure that we have capacity, coverage and resilience for the voice radio networks.

Mr Gates: I have to clarify. The technology that Superintendent Cornish is talking about is a trunked radio network, which is a technology that enables agencies to share. South Australia has the same technology as New South Wales, the ACT, Victoria, the Northern Territory and the Western Australian police. Trunked radio has its limits in terms of working across the breadth of Australia, but in South Australia they do quite a good job of having their network in less densely populated areas, as does New South Wales. That will be the mechanism by which we enable all of the emergency services to talk to one another. The issue with New South Wales is that we have not had enough spectrum to bring the police on, and because of decisions made by the ACMA in 2010 we have started to address that problem. That is something we are working on with the police.

Mr Davies: One of the dangers that we face each year is in bringing in a product called WebEOC, which is a simple computer based product which people can use, once they have passwords, to interact with over the web. It has been a fantastic change to the way we do business, because it allows us even in a remote community to ring

someone up to give them a password and they can start putting stuff onto the website or onto the system which everyone can read. It provides a very good record of what is going on.

The issue we are dealing with is one of complexity, and I think this is the issue here. There are so many different ways of communicating that after any event you can say, 'Why didn't you use that?' The answer in many cases is that things are very complex and they are not robust or simple. By way of analogy, Microsoft Word has about a thousand functions in it, of which you have probably used 50. The other 950 just add useless complexity and a big training bill. What we need to do in our systems, I think, is to try and make things a lot simpler so that we are not struggling with the technology we already have but we can exploit it properly. In that sense, a lot of this complexity comes from people trying to push the margins where they are not getting much bang for their buck, rather than accepting a fundamental basic system that works fairly well and then moving on to other things.

The other area of great weakness we have is that we will get overwhelmed by telephone calls. One of the things we have to get prepared for, when the emergency alert SMS goes out or a telephone message goes out, is our telephone-receiving set-up. It is not large but if it is not set up properly you are quickly swamped with phone calls and that then causes problems for other issues that are going on at the time.

Senator BACK: Thank you. My other colleagues have questions, so I will confine mine to one more unless there is time at the end. There is a concern expressed—if my good colleague Senator Heffernan was here he would already have expressed it, here in New South Wales, and it certainly was expressed in Western Australia during the last fire season—that there is now far too much centralising of command-control coordination, particularly by paid officers to the extent that very competent, capable volunteers with local knowledge are feeling disenfranchised and are now becoming passengers in the process.

I just want your responses as to whether you share that concern in the sense that very often the best person who is properly trained and best able to make local decisions is a local who understands conditions and knows the people et cetera. Are we in fact around Australia moving to a situation where we are removing what has always been a very important element in our emergency service management, especially in rural areas? I am not talking about central business district situations.

Mr Edwards: Our organisation prides itself on disseminating decision making for response to emergencies to the lowest possible level and that is our volunteers that are on the ground in those communities. They know the risks of those communities, they know the people in those communities and they know how best to respond to their needs during times of emergency.

Mr McDonald: From the Rural Fire Service perspective we involve senior volunteers and volunteers with local knowledge in the decision-making and planning processes. There has been some contention over the years about what is happening in my backyard but if the fire is large then the plan must take into account the five or six backyards that are involved, not just the isolated one. That is why we bring our senior volunteers and our volunteers into the decision-making process.

Senator BACK: I certainly have no expertise at all in the Canberra fires of 2003, but there is a very strongly-held contention that people at the local level with local knowledge believed then and certainly believe now that they could have got on top of those fires long before they ever got to be major incidents, but if they turned up to fire grounds they were told to go home. I ask it in that context and I am not asking for a defence of decisions taken but should that be the case then that is something at a senior organisational and government level we need to address, is it not?

Mr Davies: A lot of these things are occurring naturally. The complexity of the equipment itself means more training and hence the volunteer does not have much time for training. The new OH&S laws and the way they mandate responsibility mean that you have to be very thorough in the way you do a lot of business which, once again, starts to cut out volunteers. It is not going to be too far away before it is a very brave person who goes and grabs a few people from the side of the road and says 'Let's go and do something' because, if something goes wrong, the reviews and the OH&S laws are not very sympathetic in the way that they are dealt with at present. So there are some structural issues causing those sorts of problems. The result, of course, is that people at the local level want to have ownership of the problem and ownership of the solution and when they do not get that ownership they naturally feel grumpy and upset—and I do not blame them one iota. Hence in the north, for instance, we are very keen on our IT system, WebEOC, because we can give the local people access to it. They get to see all that is going on and broaden their horizons and at the same time have the ability to input their information into the broader system, so those of us sitting on shiny seats here in Darwin have a better understanding of what is happening there on the ground.

Senator McKENZIE: I have a question for each of you. For the Northern Territory, I am just wondering whether you can expand on the comments you made in part C of your submission on page 9 regarding the impact of emergencies and natural disasters on and implications for future communication technologies, such as the NBN. You made some comments there that I am just wondering whether you could expand on for us, particularly in light of the mobility required in the Territory in relation to technology.

Mr Davies: I have to confess that the person who wrote that paper is not here today and I am not across the technical issues there. I am sorry but I cannot elucidate further at this point.

Senator McKENZIE: Could you take that on notice, please?

Mr Davies: Certainly.

Senator McKENZIE: Thank you. New South Wales, in your submission on page 18 and 19 you give quite a good discussion on the 700 versus 800 issue and yet I am struggling to find a conclusion amidst it. Given what we heard from the AFP, I think your expertise in this area and your opinion would be highly valued. I am just wondering if you could expand on that, please.

Mr Gates: I guess the reason why we did not come to a definitive opinion is that it is currently the subject of a working group that has been convened at the federal level. The fundamental issue is that—and Superintendent Cornish made this point—voice mobile radio is going to remain critical but clearly for all those reasons we talked about data is the expanding bit. Data will support WebEOC for the Northern Territory. It will support fingerprints for policemen. It will support maps. So data is the growing bit. Data does not operate at the sort of fast speeds needed to download fingerprints and to carry video in the 400 band, which is where most of our voice systems are. It operates better at 700 and 800.

The discussions about 700 that are going on right now are the result of discussions from the digital dividend. So the spectrum has been freed up from analog television. Obviously that has a huge commercial value for the distribution of cricket and a whole range of other things. It also has a huge focus for emergency services to do work, but it raises all those issues about the money you can get for it versus what emergency services can pay for it because we do not charge. So there are those issues.

It is then a case of which spectrum is the most valuable. There is an argument about whether 700 can be used for the purposes of the police and, if it is going to be used for commercial purposes, can we go for 800? That is the discussion that is going on at the moment. Clearly we think access to some sort of data spectrum is really critical and there will be lots of people on my side of the house who will say, 'We have to get access to 700.' There are people saying, 'The demand is too great; we have to look somewhere else.' But the issue that I think was raised in Senator Back's question is that we need access to spectrum that meets operational purposes and it needs to be delivered to us in a way which we can afford because not only do we need spectrum but we need to then go off and build networks. The only alternative is to use commercial spectrum and if we are forced to use commercial spectrum then that will raise the issue of how we get reserve capacity in the commercial spectrum so that when my colleagues to the right and left are out in the field fighting fires and dealing with floods they actually have the service needed.

Senator McKENZIE: Absolutely. So, Mr Gates, your preference is then 700 with the current—

Mr Gates: My position is that there is currently an investigation being carried on. There is a committee being formed. That committee is to look in far more detail than I can offer here the value of 800. I do not have a preference per se. If 800 can deliver the spectrum and it can be delivered commercially through available technology so that we do not have to go out and build new technology and if it can be delivered to meet the needs of emergency services at a reasonable cost I do not have a preference. But that committee is going to look and see whether those criteria that I set—affordability, availability and deliverability—can be met. What our volunteers do is try to engage with the broader aspects of the community, particularly in rural New South Wales, be that through the CWA or through whatever the local mechanism is, to encourage them to prepare for the impact of fire, to make sure they understand the mechanism of fire and how it may affect the community, and to give them some information on what to do. We believe it is about improving the community's resilience to fire and about having them understand how it works and what the processes will be rather than handing them a brochure and saying, 'There; you're educated.'

Senator BOYCE: Absolutely.

Mr Place: I will talk from South Australia's perspective in terms of reducing the impact on our front-line volunteers and in terms of training, and then I will go to the community integration secondly. The Prime Minister announced late last year a $2.5 million part of the NBN rollout program to connect all of our regional country SES and Country Fire Service stations with broadband where it was possible and certainly with the rollout of

computers, which matched some of the state government's announcements of the day. So we are now in a process of rolling out a program of supported computers and access to our volunteers for the purpose of setting up two thing: not only communication but an e-business and e-learning capability.

For example, when we do our very basic bushfire-fighting 1 course, which is about a three-day program to come off the street and learn to be a Country Fire Service volunteer—the very entry-level program—roughly a day of that is spent on classroom-type activities like occupational health and safety requirements and other things that we are required to do. If we can, for example, get that down to two days practical training on site and allow the volunteers to do a one-day training program online then we have reduced one of their biggest angsts, which is being away from home more often and having to travel somewhere else to go and do a training program. It is not the answer, but it is part of the answer. So we are really strongly trying to use emerging technologies to support our training system with volunteers.

In an admin sense, the other part of the equation is that, as we see that the rural trend in South Australia is the population drift to the larger regional centres from the smaller country towns, therefore reducing your volunteer base, with the few that are left we are asking fewer to do more. It is training and it is admin, and if we can streamline those two systems with online databases that they may be able to do from their home—for example, the admin person at a Country Fire Service or SES unit can do something like that—then you reduce that pressure on them. So that is one level.

The other initiative that we are taking in terms of the community—and we in South Australia are very strong believers in a partnership approach with the community—is that we have a couple of programs running. A good example that we sort of borrowed from Victoria is the FloodSafe program, where we have volunteers. SES manage this program. The volunteers can be SES volunteers, but they do not have to be. They go into their community and become a local champion for flood information and education, and they recruit other volunteers within their community to become local champions. So, by going through a process such as this, you start to drive resilience into communities as people who are not normally associated with emergency services are representing and promoting, under the banner of an emergency service, disaster and emergency management education within their communities. The Country Fire Service do a similar program called Bushfire Blitz. It is about engaging at a community level through emergency services and getting a bigger head of steam, so to speak, with other local champions.

Senator BOYCE: How formalised is that? Will you get to the extent where you know that every relevant community has x number of local champions?

Mr Place: Resources aside, I guess that eventually we will. The resourcing level would probably determine how quickly we do that.

Senator BOYCE: Thank you. Mr Davies, do you want to comment?

Mr Davies: You mentioned occupational health and safety. The act, as I said, is formalised really well around industrial-type situations. The problem arises that if, say, a volunteer in a remote community decides to do flood-safe training or bushfire training or something like that and an accident occurs then under the act they should have done a risk assessment, as by definition it is a hazardous thing they are doing. My ability to control what someone is doing in a remote community as a volunteer is very tenuous, yet I am directly responsible for what they do, particularly if an incident occurs. Consequently, it is a very difficult game we play because traditionally our volunteers hate the administration. I have to tell you that in remote communities it gets tried on on my place all the time. The act itself is not really well suited to the situation we find in remote communities up here in the north and I think we need to think it through a bit further.

Senator BOYCE: That was the point I was trying to get to—that if we build community resilience, if we ask local communities to take some sort of responsibility for what goes on in natural disasters, it is going to be quite likely that there will be people doing things that might then cause work safety issues or the sorts of things that Senator Back was talking about before where people came out to help and then got sent away. If you build resilience, you are going to build the sense that, 'I need to take responsibility for this,' I would think. That is why I was asking whether you had looked at, discussed and come to an opinion about where the balance is there.

Mr Davies: The balance is a pretty tricky one to achieve. I was at a meeting the other day where they mentioned the volunteers who helped clean up Brisbane. The problem is of course that they tossed out a lot of people's memories without thinking, with the best of intentions.

Senator BOYCE: Not just memories—actually valuable things that only needed a wash down.

Mr Davies: That is a terrible state of affairs. You can see people trying to do the right thing, with the best of intentions, yet it has gone wrong. In this area there are lots with the best intention. The review and the royal

commission afterwards will go through in minute detail and lambast the emergency measures for what they could have done or what was done without really understanding, from my perspective anyway, the complexities of the issues on the ground.

Chief Supt McDonald: In relation to people taking responsibility for their own actions, it is important in terms of building community resilience that we make people aware that they are responsible for their properties, that they are responsible for what goes on on their boundary, that they are responsible for the preparation of properties et cetera. There seems to be a waning of that responsibility in that 'government will solve that'.

Senator BOYCE: We could also talk about people alerting their next-door neighbours or checking on their neighbours.

Chief Supt McDonald: Checking on their neighbours, that sort of stuff.

Senator BILYK: In Tasmania, for example, the fire brigade goes to the schools and talks to the school kids and they do evacuation plans for their own home and things like that. Does anything like that happen in the educating systems of the territories or New South Wales especially in regard to areas which may be prone to bushfires or a natural disasters?

Chief Supt McDonald: Certainly in New South Wales we promote a bushfire action plan, which is made available through local papers, websites and our community directory.

Senator BILYK: But do you go into the schools?

Chief Supt McDonald: Certainly we do comm ed through the schools. There is a whole program based around that and we find on occasion that the kids come home and say, 'We need a bushfire action plan, Mum.'

Senator BILYK: Yes. My children did that a number of years ago.

Chief Supt McDonald: That works well because they beat them over the head.

Senator BILYK: They did.

Mr Edwards: We do a similar thing. We also provide cadet programs for students in high schools to learn more about the SES and how to make their communities safer. One comment I would like to make is that potentially they could be looking at some sort of national curriculum or that type of thing so that there are consistent messages provided to all of our children on what to do during emergencies.

ACTING CHAIR: We have only a minute left and I do not have time to ask my questions, so I will put them on notice. Could each of the jurisdictions advise the committee of the steps which have been taken in each jurisdiction arising from the two royal commissions and the commission of inquiry in the ACT in relation to recommendations on communications and warnings, just so that we can get some overview as to what has happened in each of your jurisdictions. Mr Gates, I am sure the police federation says that we should ask the New South Wales technical people about the benefits of 700 over 800 megahertz. You seem equivocal about it in terms of what is best. Can you take on notice and just give us some idea of any of the technical issues you see involved with 700 megahertz versus 800 megahertz. And I would ask any of the other groups to provide that as well.

Mr Gates: Chair, I am not equivocal; it is just a very complex issue and, as I said, the criterion for us is: can we get a solution that is affordable and does the job that emergency services need? It is yet to be tested whether 800 can deliver that.

CHAIR: Thank you for that. We really cannot take this any further. It has been very helpful. Thank you everyone, and a thankyou to the Northern Territory for your patience and cooperation coming in online. I know it is difficult. Thank you very much everyone.

BURKE, Dr Susie, Senior Psychologist, Public Interest, Disasters and the Environment, Australian Psychological Society

RONAN, Professor Kevin, Chair, Disaster Reference Group, Australian Psychological Society

[12:38]

ACTING CHAIR: The committee welcomes representatives from the Australian Psychological Society via teleconference. The committee has received your submission as submission No. 32. Do wish to make any amendments alterations to your submission?

Dr Burke: No.

ACTING CHAIR: Do you wish to make a brief opening statement before we go to questions?

Dr Burke: Yes, I would be happy to do that. I am a psychologist at the Australian Psychological Society. We put in a submission in which we focused mainly on the human based aspects of communication networks rather than the technical aspects, because our understanding of the research is that they are a critical component of whether they are effective or not. In particular, we talked about two things. We talked about the importance of good preparation, both physical and psychological, to precede emergency warnings in order to enhance their effectiveness. In our submission we also talked about the important aspects and characteristics of the message that will make them more effective or not. We made mention of the importance of communication pre-disaster and also during the disaster, but we also had some comments about some of the communication messages to the public post-disaster and the importance of them being framed in a particular way to facilitate further good preparation and response to subsequent disasters.

ACTING CHAIR: Professor Ronan, do you have anything to add?

Prof. Ronan: No; Dr Burke and I spoke previously and she was going to cover the opening statement.

Senator BACK: Thank you very much for your submission—you are quite right; what you are focusing on is somewhat different. We have heard from earlier witnesses today that the role of engaging with the community is only one aspect—the whole issue associated with getting members of the community to do something is another. One of those witnesses was by teleconference from the Northern Territory—Mr Davies—and he mentioned emergency warning fatigue. He was referring to cyclones that are on the way and the community gets alerted and nothing happens so they go back to rest et cetera. You are all too familiar with the new technologies, the new social network communications media, so can you give the committee some advice on the sorts of actions that you think emergency service providers and others should be performing to try to overcome the issue of either indifference or 'it won't happen to me' or 'my privacy is more important that somebody else telling me what to do'?

Prof. Ronan: There are a number of issues embedded in the question you are raising. One of them is the false alarm syndrome; another one is helping to get a community to take up a warning message in the way that the warning message is intended and to remain open to future warning messages if an initial one proves to be, as it has tended to be called, a false alarm. When we consider some of the issues that are related to warning systems, I suppose I would start from the top and say there are really two main issues if we think about it quite simplistically—there is the nature of the warning message itself but there is also, then, what we collectively call the human factor, which is the ability of a community to take up a message. On both of those there are certain things that we have quite a bit of information about in our submission that relate to the characteristics of a warning message that appear to assist the cause in terms of the message being specific, accurate, clear, providing specific guidance and being sent to those people who are in risk areas et cetera. Also, quite importantly, you can have the best crafted warning message that the community reacts to in ways that are either in their best interests or in other cases, as we have seen in various sorts of disasters, not in their best interests.

A warning message on its own, from our view and from the research that has accumulated over the years, no matter how well crafted, is insufficient. A community has to be prepared to take up the message in such a way that they are going to be able to use it to protect themselves and their families. One of the things we know about warning messages, for example, is that a finely crafted warning message can be sent to the public and members of the public who are not in risk areas, who are in fact in safe zones, and their high state of emotional arousal starts to compromise their decision-making capacity and they in fact move themselves from a safe zone into a higher hazard zone, or a high risk zone. In order to buttress against that kind of eventuality, it is really important that the human factor is taken into account prior to the need for an early warning and helping prepare communities themselves and also, really importantly, preparing across the various agencies that are somehow linked in with a warning message so that they are collectively all on the same page and are going to be providing the same kind of

information that is consistent, accurate, clear, specific and provides specific guidance that is being put out by multiple sources that are trusted by the public.

I suppose I could prattle on some more but really good preparedness is essential. I can go through a five-step model that reflects some of what the UN's disaster reduction strategy promotes. In the first instance, as Susie herself said, there is really no substitute for good, advanced preparedness activities on both the part of the emergency responding agencies and the part of a community.

Senator BACK: I wonder whether you would be good enough to send to the secretariat that UN summary. I think that would be of interest to us.

Prof. Ronan: I would be pleased to, yes.

Senator BACK: Thank you for the response. Generally, in accordance with what you are saying, are we now facing in Australia, particularly with the urbanisation of our community, a circumstance in which what we once would have assumed a person may have seen as being common sense is no longer seen that way? I go to the Black Saturday fires and the number of instances in which people afterwards either did not read the signs of weather on the day or took no action pending somebody in authority telling them what to do. By way of example, I spoke to the head of the Northern Territory bushfire service after that event and he was in that same area one week afterwards and the weather conditions were exactly the same—very, very low humidity, a high temperature in the 40s and wind of a very uncomfortable nature. As he said to me, 'I just knew, without needing to be a Victorian, it was the wrong place to be.' He said, 'I couldn't understand why so many people hadn't read that and already made their own plans to evacuate well before the actual conflagration.' Am I right in this concern about urbanisation and the lack now of the commonality of common sense and, in the event I am, what sorts of communications actions could we be taking to overcome that?

Dr Burke: I could perhaps start off by responding to that. I am not sure whether it is a function of urbanisation or a combination of a whole lot of other psychological factors that we know quite well about minimising risk, about finding it easy to believe that it is not going to happen and wanting to believe that and also by a sort of numbing of our response, because in fact many of the days and weeks preceding that very high-risk day were also fairly high risk as well, although not as bad. So it is hard to then differentiate between one extreme day and another somewhat extreme day. There are a whole lot of psychological factors that act as barriers to people taking the risk seriously and then knowing exactly what to do, and furthermore then taking those actions. So the second part of your question is very important, which is, 'What can we do to have four things happen?' so that people can perceive the risk, they can see that this risk applies to them, they know what to do to protect themselves from it and they do it. Those four elements have to be in place for people to be able to make themselves safe. At the risk of us saying the same thing over and over again, it goes back to that preparation. So the more that community members have done preparation beforehand—anticipated what it is going to be like, learnt how to read the warning signs, made themselves a plan, anticipated that they are likely to minimise the risks and how to catch themselves when they are doing that and when they are avoiding doing anything about it, and know clearly what they and every single member of their family is going to do—the better they will be at maximising the chance that they then will take the appropriate action and get themselves into a safe place.

Senator BACK: Thank you, Dr Burke.

Prof. Ronan: Can I supplement that briefly. In relation to that urbanisation factor, when we talk about warning systems or warning types of messages, various literature has defined different types of warning messages. Some of the more recent literature has indicated five different categories. One of those is via natural warning signs. In a more urbanised culture, there may be a tendency over time to miss some of the natural warning signs, some of the signals that our forbears or people who are not more urbanised—who are more used to living on the land and noticing the natural signals that accompany the predecessor to a bushfire—might have been able to pick up on more quickly. I would add that the commonsense factor is but one issue in relation to what Dr Burke was talking about, which is that what seems like common sense is, under high states of duress and emotional arousal, less like common sense. It is the same as developing something for a sporting event—you have to train it and trust it in a sense. The more prepared, forewarned and forearmed you are, the better you will be able to respond when the higher arousal comes into play when a warning message is received.

ACTING CHAIR: I have a quick question and then I will hand over the chair to Senator Humphries because I have another commitment I have to attend. What is the worse situation: having too many warnings so that people have a psychological problem with too many warnings or not having the capacity to provide decent warnings and people losing all of their belongings and even, with some people, their lives?

Prof. Ronan: If I had to be pinned down on one of the two, it would be the latter. The reason for that is research that has been done, particularly by my colleagues. I spent 10 years at Massey University in New Zealand and still do a lot of research with my colleagues at the Joint Centre for Disaster Research, based at Massey University. A number of them are volcanologists, and volcanology has been one of the sciences that has really tracked down the need, with early warning, for the social science to supplement the physical science.

One thing we know is the value of engaging in those social factors of helping communities to prepare to evacuate—simulating those evacuations. For example, in Rabaul, Papua New Guinea, they did 10 years worth of simulated evacuations. They had 19 hours of advance warning before the volcano actually erupted in 1994 and they were able to evacuate the vast majority of 17,000 people in the town that year. In 1985 in a place called Nevado del Ruiz in Colombia the word from the science people was that there was an imminent risk of some lahars—some mudflows. That warning from the science people was not taken up by the people who disseminate warning messages. Perhaps as a result of that disconnection, that town was actually buried by lahars and 21,000 people died. So if you have to be pinned down to which one is the more insidious of the choices, it is most definitely going to be not providing the warning when it is absolutely essential.

There is also the problem, on the other side, of the false alarm syndrome in the case of providing too many warnings. But, as we put in our submission, part of the issue around those providing the initial warning that perhaps does not come to fruition is the language that is associated with the non-event. Rather than calling it a false alarm, it is perhaps better to use different language to try to describe it. But the media will probably pick it up and call it something like a false alarm. I am not suggesting it is not a problem but in relative terms it is the lesser.

ACTING CHAIR (Senator Humphries): I want to ask about what you said in your submission about the use of social media. You mention:

… that public source applications can be hacked, and misinformation be deliberately spread.

You made reference to what happened after the Japanese tsunami. I am not familiar with that particular aspect of the disaster in Japan. Can you tell us what happened there.

Dr Burke: Unless Professor Ronan can add to it, I will have to take that on notice and get back to you with that because that part of the submission was written by a colleague who is not with me today.

ACTING CHAIR: That is fine, but you are obviously making the point that people are relying on social media in many cases as if it were as authoritative as an official warning issued by a government department of certain things to watch out for. We need to take special measures to ensure that, if possible, there is some reliability in those sorts of messages.

Dr Burke: In many cases the information that people are relying on might be transferred very quickly between friendship networks or informal networks, and one way of minimising the risks of misinformation being spread is to simultaneously have as up-to-date accurate quality information also being distributed from reliable authoritative sources so that there is a possibility that people can be cross-checking their information.

Prof. Ronan: But it is the case that the key research backs the idea that people quite often will get their initial warning from some informal source.

ACTING CHAIR: Good point.

Senator BILYK: I asked the previous state and territory government representatives about if there was any education taking place in schools for young people that they knew about, especially in areas that are at risk of natural disasters or similar situations. Do you think that if there were education programs taking place in schools that that would help mitigate psychological problems of people being given too many false alarms or whatever—bearing in mind I err on the side of caution in regard to alarms personally because I think, as soon as the government or the police or the emergency services do not give out an alarm and something happens, they are going to be the ones that are caught up in the fire storm, so to speak, of responsibility. I am just thinking about this process of making people more aware, starting at a young age, and helping them learn how to deal with the whole process of alarms and responses. It was suggested previously that maybe something should be in the national curriculum. Have you got any comments to make with regard to that?

Prof. Ronan: To say it in the most academic or scholarly way: you are singing my tune. We published a book a couple of years ago called, funnily enough, *Promoting community resilience in disasters: the role for schools, youth, and families*. It is our contention, based on good common sense but also converging that good common sense that you are talking about right now with the research that has developed in this emerging area, that there is no question that you could embed within the school system the ability for kids to know how to approach and deal with risk—when I say risk I mean sort of largely defined, not just disaster risk but risk itself; I do not mean just

around the putting kids in cotton wool dealing with risk kind of talk that sometimes gets played up in the media—in ways that are both healthy as well as unsafe. Part of that is helping get good preparation for disasters, how to respond to disaster warnings, how to help with home based preparedness and the like. It defines some of the core of my programmatic research in this area. The short answer to your question is: I have no doubt.

Senator BILYK: Thank you for that. Do you have any information or knowledge about whether at the moment potential psychological impacts are taken into consideration by the authorities when emergency warnings are given?

Prof. Ronan: I think there has been development in that area in the past couple of decades. There is a bit more attention to that. Whether that is across the board in every instance is probably not the case, but I think there has been an increased sensitivity to the crafting of the message in such a way that it is going to promote the uptake in the community as opposed to the kinds of messages that will either overwhelm people, cause people to ignore the message or overly sensitise them or something like that. I think there has been an improvement in the nature of that and part of it has been the build-up of research that has happened probably since about the 1970s or 1980s

Senator BILYK: Thank you.

Senator BOYCE: I wanted to follow up further. Professor Ronan, you mentioned that the media might very well use the term 'false alarm' when you would be suggesting they use 'near miss' or 'close call'. Are you aware of any discussions with the media around this framing?

Prof. Ronan: I am glad that you raised this issue. The teams that I do research with are based in university settings but we also then have connections to a number of emergency management kinds of groups in various places. One of the things that we try to help emergency managers get onto and that we ourselves do is as part of having advance discussions amongst different agencies that matter prior to a disaster and prior to the delivery of an effective warning message is that one of those 'agencies' is really the media. So developing relationships with the media in advance as part of an overall community preparedness approach I think is really quite critical to try to help get out in front of the potential for the use of terms like 'false alarm'.

Dr Burke: To add to that, something that the Australian Psychological Society endeavour to do around disaster seasons in particular areas is try to communicate with local media and talk to them about how we think a message should be crafted to maximise its effectiveness. It is also worth considering the work that the Dart Centre for Journalism and Trauma do as well because that is a particular interest of theirs and they spend some time and effort building connections with journalists and media around how disasters are reported and talked about.

Senator BOYCE: It seems to me that there is some sort of consensus about behaving in a socially responsible way in some areas. For instance, although it is now contentious, the reporting of suicide was an area where media did have a consensus. I was wondering whether this could be something that came under the same sort of socially responsible reporting umbrella.

Dr Burke: Yes, that is a really good example to use. We have often thought that following a similar avenue as was followed around the suicide reporting would be a really good thing in disasters.

Prof. Ronan: It was my experience during the floods and cyclones in Queensland that when I did the number of media interviews that I did that the media by and large are very receptive to that socially responsible kind of idea.

Senator BOYCE: That is good. Something else that you may well have come across during the work of the reference group or the society itself is that there were a number of communities in Queensland both in the northern Queensland and South-East Queensland that were to all intents and purposes completely isolated from the rest of society for one or more days. I met a number of people who clearly were simply natural leaders but were almost exhausted by the pressure or distress that other members in the community through wanting them to be the leaders had put on them and the fact that, whilst they were trying to take on those leadership roles in their local communities, they had no authority from other hierarchical structures to do so. I am thinking about one woman, I will not name the area, who ended up being the 'village chief' for want of a better term but then got criticised strongly by a local mayor for the decisions that she had made in what she thought were the best interests of the community in terms of where rubbish was placed and other things like that. Is there, in your view, a system that could overcome this almost like a warden system or something? Could you just talk through the psychology of leaders?

Prof. Ronan: As well as the ideas that have been identified in quite a bit of research there is this concept that sociologists call emergent groups that tend to form in the wake of a disaster. Those groups will tend to have various stronger leaders that front those groups. Those emergent groups are those that are in some ways doing for the good to try to help the community get back on its feet. As the term itself implies the groups tend to emerge as

a function of the actual event itself. It probably becomes a little bit difficult to identify what groups might emerge in advance in order to then have some preliminary liaison, communication and cooperation in advance of a disaster. In my view, the extent to which a local council and local emergency management—in our case here in Rockhampton some of us here at the university—can begin a conversation that becomes a public conversation, the more likely it is that we are going to be able to pull out from the woodwork those who might be likely to emerge in the case of more flooding, or whatever might happen here, and raise the chance of being able to identify those leaders in the first instance. So it is really about having some public discourse and some of that getting the word out.

Dr Burke: If I could add to that, a lot of the work that we have been involved with in Victoria and Queensland has been in the immediate recovery aftermath. One of the methods that we use, teach and promote is psychological first aid, which is used increasingly around the world as that first response. In America the American Psychological Society and the Red Cross have for many years been running psychological first aid workshops in disaster vulnerable communities before a disaster impacts. That has been a way of educating as many people as possible within a community about how to respond in the immediate aftermath of a disaster at the time when you are talking about, when many communities are quite isolated.

An important component also of that type of first aid, those pre-disaster type first aid workshops, is around self-care. I think they have incredible value as a way of both preparing communities for threats and how they might respond and also promoting their ability to recover well in those initial days when they might be on their own and there is high arousal, high chaos and a lot of disorganisation. It is through those sorts of workshops, too, that natural leaders within a community can be identified and can be skilled up to rise and step into those positions of knowing how to respond, knowing how to pick warning signs in people and all the sorts of things that you are talking about. I think that is an excellent model, and we have been quite interested in trying to promote it as a pre-disaster thing in disaster vulnerable communities.

Senator BOYCE: Dr Burke, are these stand-alone courses or are they part of the physical, clean-out-your-gutters type of workshop preparation?

Dr Burke: My understanding is that in America it is different in every region. We have been interested in talking with some of our colleagues in the Red Cross here in Australia about the possibility of running these sorts of workshops in conjunction with physical preparation workshops. It might look like a two-day workshop where you come into a community and you have there the SES, the CFA, the Community Fireguard. I am thinking about the southern bushfire vulnerable communities. You teach some psychological first aid, you teach some psychological preparation and you get them to look at their household preparedness plans. So it becomes a whole skilling-up of the community, finding out who does what and giving them a little bit of information in all of those really important areas.

Prof. Ronan: If I might supplement that very quickly, if that kind of approach is then supplemented with some work that is being done in the schools, it can really raise the profile of that sort of public discourse. One of the things we know about schoolkids is that they take up these kinds of messages and, particularly when you give them interactive homework to do around household preparedness, kids go home and badger parents and give them a little bit of a gee up and those sorts of things. If there are multiple sorts of efforts that are going on in a community that can be useful both to identify those emergent leaders and also for other purposes.

Senator BOYCE: All the parents looked a bit shocked at all that homework, Professor Ronan. But, yes, it is a good suggestion.

Prof. Ronan: I hear you.

Senator McKENZIE: Senator Boyce's questions lead nicely into mine. My original question is around social media and issues of trust, in that behaviour of human beings seems more readily changed through social media rather than media that is from more 'respected' sources. Could you comment on the reasons for that? Regarding the discussion around emergent leadership, during the bushfire in Victoria there were instances of local leaders willingly and passionately throwing out the rule book on what was acceptable behaviour and thereby saving their communities from bushfires. I was wondering if you comment on that sort of thing and the issues around trust of media sources? I think you have touched on this with your first aid issue, but can you comment more formally on the communications networks during the recovery period after disasters?

Prof. Ronan: Regarding trust, along both the formal and informal channels of communication, it is more likely for people to get an initial warning via an informal channel, but often they will then move to a more formal channel to try to verify some information—they will turn on the radio, the television or go to a website. The more that there is what the research calls 'source certainty' around a warning message the more likely it is to be taken

up. In other words, the more there is trust in that source of information the more likely it is going to happen. I might add that it is not just trust in terms of the interface between the warning disseminator and the public; it is also between those who are behind the scenes and who are intended to be cooperating to produce a well crafted warning message.

In that case I mentioned earlier about Nevado del Ruiz in Colombia, one of the things we might speculate about—we do not know for sure—was that there was information that was disseminated by the scientists that was not then translated into an effective warning system. One of the things we might speculate about for those kinds of warning systems that are affective, we are going to make an assumption that there were some advance planning and discussions that increased the trust between all those agencies that are players in the crafting of the warning message, such that an initial piece of information from a scientific agency is then received well by the next one down the line so that it is then disseminated in such a way to the community that it has the backing of all the important agencies. There is a parallel process between trust from the community as well as trust within the agencies.

The other question was around the communication networks in the recovery phase. Susie, do you want to have a crack at that while I have a bit of a think?

Dr Burke: I was just wondering if you wanted to elaborate on the question? You talked about some community members throwing the rule book out on what was acceptable behaviour but with the good result of saving the town. I wondered if you could repeat the question?

Senator McKENZIE: I had written the question down and you had sort of started to answer it with the psychological first aid. Aside from warning people before an emergency or natural disaster, what is the role of communication networks in communities that are dealing with the aftermath of natural disasters?

Dr Burke: Yes, that is a good question. It is almost as important as the role of communication networks prior to the emergency because there is so much information that needs to be disseminated afterwards. In a state of disorganisation, particularly when a lot of the communication networks are down in the immediate aftermath, people are going to be relying on much more informal sources of information until they are able to re-access the internet, telephones and things like that. It is something that needs to be considered: how do people get reliable and useful information when they are not able to access information along the usual channels?

Prof. Ronan: I would extend that by saying that the place where that really needs to be done is not once the disaster hits but in advance of that, during that preparedness phase. In the creation of an early warning system, other steps are involved. I mentioned at the outset that as the UN disaster reduction strategy and the research literature promote, and it shows some effectiveness, once you get an early warning system you need to have a number of additional steps that include planning—the cooperation, discussion and communication phase—and education and participation of the community and of government and other responding agencies, including the media. Then you sort of culminate that by having some exercises, simulations, that are not just simulations on the table but proper simulations, to the extent possible, that are empirically evaluated. In these you can then test, albeit in a simulated environment, the ability of these preplanned communication networks and the various things that may work, as well as the various things that may go wrong. You could then have a flexible plan in place, with plan A and some backup systems in plan B et cetera.

ACTING CHAIR: I thank you both for your time with the committee today. It is a good submission and you gave some very useful testimony to the committee.

Proceedings suspended from 13:16 to 14:15

JAMES, Mr Hugh Waring Stodart, Manager, Transmission Services, Special Broadcasting Service Corporation

RASMUSSEN, Mr Anthony William, Manager, Regional Local Radio, Australian Broadcasting Corporation

SUTTON, Dr David John, Head of Strategic Policy, Australian Broadcasting Corporation

WARD, Mr Michael, Head, Operations Planning, Australian Broadcasting Corporation

[14.15]

ACTING CHAIR: I welcome representatives of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation and the Special Broadcasting Service. I thank you for talking to us today. The committee has received your submissions as submissions 35 and 12 respectively. Do you wish to make any amendments or alterations to your submissions?

Dr Sutton: No.

ACTING CHAIR: Do you wish to make a brief opening statement before we go to questions?

Dr Sutton: If you do not mind.

ACTING CHAIR: Dr Sutton, just before we do that, can I indicate that SBS are not online yet. We are expecting them to come on any minute but we thought we would kick along with the ABC.

Dr Sutton: An important part of the ABC's role is to engage with and reflect communities across the nation. To do this we have local offices and we operate local radio services in 60 towns and cities across the country. Our local radio service has a 99.4 per cent penetration of the Australian population. We see this as more than an informational role. Our staff live in those local communities. They build strong relationships with those local communities and they earn the trust of their audiences in those local communities. This, we believe, is why in times of crisis audiences turn to the ABC to understand what is happening.

For clarity, we have no statutory obligation to be an emergency services broadcaster and we are not directly funded to do it, but people throughout Australia expect it of us, and when those communities are in harm's way we do everything we can to assist by providing up-to-date information, announcements and warnings. Our other role in such times is to keep the nation, and sometimes the world, informed of the crisis as it unfolds. We think we do quite a good job with the resources that we have.

In recent years we have provided emergency broadcasts in different parts of the country covering fires, floods, cyclones, equine flu outbreaks, heatwaves, locust plagues, tsunami warnings and severe storms. We have detailed emergency broadcasting plans in place at all sites across the country that we can put into effect at short notice. We train our staff in emergency broadcasting, which we believe to be very, very important. We educate our audiences as wet seasons approach, we inform them during emergency events and we assist them with any recovery that is necessary afterwards.

We have relationships and agreements with emergency services bodies in all states and territories and this allows us to provide our audiences with the accurate and reliable information that they require as quickly as we can. We make contingency plans and we do everything our resources allow to ensure continuity of service throughout these emergencies. We are pleased to be able to say that during last summer's Queensland floods and tropical cyclone, ABC radio did not go off air.

Radio, I should point out, is our front line in times of emergencies when people are on the move or are not in a position to sit still and receive information from a television screen. However, our emergency coverage is supported across all of our platforms through crawls on television, coverage on ABC News 24, dedicated emergency sites online and through social media services like Facebook and Twitter. That, in summary, is the ABC's contribution to emergency communications in this country. If you like, I can briefly introduce my two colleagues and explain what they can speak to.

ACTING CHAIR: That would be helpful.

Dr Sutton: Mr Rasmussen is responsible for all of our regional local radio services and has direct experience of dealing with these matters on the ground as they happen. Mr Ward is from our operations area and, hopefully, can speak more knowledgably than I can to a lot of aspects of transmission infrastructure and operational issues of that kind. With that we welcome your questions.

ACTING CHAIR: I will start with a question that you may be expecting. There was some criticism of the ABC during, I think, the Queensland floods about not having reporters actually reporting on the incident as it was

happening. The ABC indicated this was because of health and safety issues. Do you stand by that decision? Was that the correct decision and does that mean you are diminished in terms of your capacity to report to the public?

Mr Rasmussen: I gather you are talking about the reporters being allowed out following Cyclone Yasi?

ACTING CHAIR: I think it was the cyclone, yes—that is what I am talking about.

Mr Rasmussen: We had reporters and our ABC local radio staff on site in those three regional areas that were affected by Yasi, being Mackay, Townsville and Cairns. But we certainly did put the safety of our staff as paramount in our considerations of our coverage of that event. We did want them to stay out of harm's way during the height of the cyclone. But prior to and immediately after they were on the ground reporting.

ACTING CHAIR: Did that diminish your capacity to keep the public informed?

Mr Rasmussen: No. In Cyclone Yasi we had staff actually situated in the SES or the Queensland emergency facility in Cairns, which is rated as a category 5 facility. They were able to report directly into our programs, and we maintained our broadcasts into the regions. But they were able to report live what was happening with regard to everything that listeners would have needed to know. We also called upon our listeners to contribute through the use of talkback and actually getting eyewitness reports about what was happening on the ground.

Senator HUMPHRIES: Could I start by saying that I do not need much evidence of ABC radio's role in emergency situations having been in part of Canberra that was affected by bushfires in 2003. I know what a sterling role 666 played during that time in keeping people connected. I was in a home that lost power early on in the crisis and there were houses ablaze in my suburb, so knowing what was going on was very important. ABC local radio was the only access I had to information and it did a great job. So I will start by putting that on the record.

You mention in your submission:

> The ABC relies on information provided by emergency agencies for timely and effective warnings.

And you talk about:

> … variations in the manner in which this information is provided around the country. The Corporation has also experienced situations in which it has proved difficult to obtain vital contextual information on a natural disaster as it unfolds.

Can you give me an example of what you are talking about with those?

Mr Rasmussen: I think that sometimes some of these events are moving so fast that it is a challenge for the emergency services to gather the information themselves and then to pass it on to a third party such as us to broadcast. I think we have experienced some times when information flow has been a little bit slow, but each of these events has been a learning process for both the emergency services and agencies and the ABC. Each time we have had a disaster or emergency that we have had to cover we have had extensive debriefs and included people like the weather bureau, state emergency services, fire services and police in those debriefs. We are learning from each episode. For instance, since 2003 I would warrant that things have improved considerably.

Senator HUMPHRIES: Is there something you would suggest that we should recommend to deal with that problem?

Mr Rasmussen: I believe that you will speak to representatives from emergency services about their processes, but I think that it is probably up to them to review their systems.

Senator HUMPHRIES: Commercial Radio Australia have suggested that emergency organisations and stakeholders should appoint specific spokespeople who are available 24 hours a day during emergencies to provide information and that local radio station journalists should be included within the local command centres during an emergency to ensure immediate and accurate reporting of information. Would that be something that ABC local radio, for example, would take up if it were available? Would you recommend it?

Mr Rasmussen: Yes, if the emergency services were to provide that access we would take it up immediately. We have never had real problems with getting spokespeople to give us information on what is happening on the ground, but we would certainly take up that offer to get into command posts et cetera.

Senator HUMPHRIES: When you say it is hard to obtain contextual information on a disaster it is not because you cannot access a spokesperson; it is because it is not clear what they are talking about or they do not have enough information themselves to tell you what is going on.

Mr Rasmussen: That is right. Sometimes events are moving so fast that it is hard to get accurate information.

Senator HUMPHRIES: The last point you raised in your submission is about wanting mechanisms by which the ABC would acquire information directly from telecommunications companies when there are interruptions to their services during times of emergency. What is the problem there? Is it that the telecommunications companies

will not divulge where their networks have failed? Or is there not a mechanism for them to submit their information directly to ABC about what goes on?

Mr Ward: I am just trying to think of the context for it. Thinking back to the floods, the issue was about restoring the service. I know that was an issue at one stage. I need to go back and have another look at that actually. I am not sure what—

Senator HUMPHRIES: I can recall during the flooding in Queensland that I saw fairly good information from the telecommunications companies about what networks were down. They were saying where their networks were down and when they expected to get them back online. That was probably by way of media releases or something like that. So if you have any specific proposal about how getting that information to ABC could be improved, we would appreciate hearing about what that might be.

Dr Sutton: We will come back to that.

Mr Ward: Yes. I will go check that.

ACTING CHAIR: I welcome Hugh James from SBS to the panel. Mr James, do you have any changes to the submission you have made?

Mr James: No.

ACTING CHAIR: Would you like to make a short opening statement?

Mr James: Yes, I would. I should reveal my past. I have spent over 30 years in broadcasting, most of it involved in emergency communication via radio and TV. The first 20 years of that was in Western Australia where I was responsible for putting in an emergency warning system via the new satellite service to the cyclone ravaged areas up a north.

In my experience, the public are the best asset that we have in an emergency. All they need is direction. Broadcasting is the one medium that can provide to everyone instant communication, particularly radio. Most households have a transistor radio, a mobile phone with an FM radio in it and/or a car radio. A car radio will actually last for weeks without the car running. They all work in the event of a power failure.

We have already heard mention of the Canberra bushfires. During the Canberra bushfires every other communication media was congested—the public switchboard network, mobile networks, fax and internet. Even the emergency services' own communications network was congested. The only one that was still operative, courtesy of the ABC, was broadcasting.

Alongside my role as manager of transmission services for SBS I am also the co-chair of the communications sector group of the critical infrastructure advisory committee. In that role we have worked very hard to ensure that broadcasters work cooperatively. We have an agreement with both radio and television operators that we will all work together to try and maintain at least one high-power FM and one high-power AM service, come what may. We will work together to do that, whether that is the ABC's transmitter or someone else's transmitter. In the Victorian bushfires we had a situation where the ABC went to air courtesy of a community broadcaster's transmitter. Most of the broadcasters have MOUs or protocols in place with the state governments.

There is one thing to bear in mind with emergency broadcasts and emergency warnings: they are not the same as news. From a broadcaster's point of view, they actually go through a different route. They go direct to the on-air presenter. They do not get editorialised. News can be editorialised—and will be by the news directors, guaranteed. If you want to get a message out, it has to go straight through. No offence to our news colleagues, but it has to bypass the newsroom. For most broadcasters we have protocols in place to do that.

One of the areas where broadcasters are concerned is in the supply of liquid fuels in the case of power failures. We have worked long and hard to try and ensure that we are assured a supply of liquid fuels in an emergency. Without that, we only have between 24 hours and, in some cases, up to a week of fuel supplies. Somehow we need a mechanism to ensure, given an emergency, that the broadcasting is kept alive.

We also need education of the public in this country. The public in the north-west of WA are well aware of cyclones. There are cyclone warnings every year and they are well aware of it. They keep an eye on their televisions. A scroll will come across telling them to listen to ABC radio at quarter past the hour, I think, to get the latest cyclone warning and update. That does not apply in our major metro areas. People do not know where to go for the information. In Canberra they did well, listening to ABC radio during the bushfire, and generally ABC radio is the best source. The only limitation of ABC radio is that it is all in English. SBS, of course, transmits in 68 languages. We have a role in educating the public as to the simple things like the 'whoop whoop' sound. If you hear that on a radio, you should respond. You should at least listen. You should at least ask someone what it

means, even if you do not speak the language. SBS has a role in education. SBS also has a role in getting the message out to those non-English speakers.

In a slightly wider role, there is a lot of work being done overseas on emergency warnings. In the recent Japanese earthquake and tsunami, the relatively low death toll was a testament to the work done particularly by the Japanese broadcasters on developing an emergency warning system that is now built into their radios. The radio sits there, off, and given the tsunami it comes to life and broadcasts the warning. That is now being put out across South-East Asia, and Australia should take note of that for the future.

With that, I will close my remarks, with a reminder that SBS would dearly love to get to more people in Australia. At the moment we are largely limited to the metro areas and the non-English speakers outside the metro areas are left high and dry.

ACTING CHAIR: You should never let a good opportunity pass and you have done the job. Could I ask a question of both SBS and ABC. Obviously you are in a unique position as public broadcasters and you have unique responsibilities. Do you think the commercial stations do enough heavy lifting during periods of emergency?

Mr James: I must admit I have been pleasantly surprised at the reaction in the communications sector group at how well they have come on board, supporting the concept that the broadcasters are in this together. They do have protocols in place, as no doubt they will explain to you. They probably have more of a tendency to take it as a news item, editorialise it and try and turn it into some revenue. But I think generally they do a pretty good job.

Mr Rasmussen: We have had some great examples of cooperation with commercial radio in the past. One that springs to mind is the floods previous to the last ones in Queensland, which were affecting the area around St George. We had one transmitter that was likely to be inundated by that flood, and the commercial broadcaster's transmitter was on much higher ground. We had very good cooperation with them to use that transmitter to put to air our emergency broadcasts. They were more than willing to join with us in that, so I think we have a reasonably good relationship with them.

Senator BACK: Coming from Western Australia, I can certainly confirm Mr James's comments and say to you that the ABC, particularly, is the absolute lifeline and continues to be, probably more so in rural areas because you are often the only supplier, or the only reliable supplier where there are instances in which commercial radio is not. The other point to confirm is the fact that, at least on our radio waves in WA, the periodic reporting is the highest priority, in fact it is the only priority outside the news—it cuts through. It enables me to ask the question: you said at the beginning, I think, Dr Sutton, that it is not a statutory obligation. Given that this committee's role is to report and recommend to the Senate, do you believe that it would enhance the long-term security and viability of the ABC's and SBS's involvement for that to be a statutory obligation under your respective legislations?

Dr Sutton: In short, I do not think it is necessary. I think we do this because of our engagement with local communities. As I pointed out, we essentially have undertaken this role without a statutory obligation and without any direct line of funding to do it. We do it because it is important for the ABC as a national broadcaster to be there for local communities when there are times of crisis, and we would continue to do it. If the parliament saw fit to amend the ABC Act to create it as an obligation we would take that on, but in a sense it would simply be confirming something that we already do and already regard as a fundamental part of our role.

Senator BACK: Mr James?

Mr James: The one area where I suspect legislation might be helpful is in the liquid fuels question, which is only peripheral to this whole question.

Senator BACK: The liquid fuels for what purpose? Running gensets?

Mr James: Running gensets, yes. Both the ABC and ourselves run gensets at our major transmission sites so that when the power fails we can stay on air. The limitation is how much fuel we can store on site and how long they can run.

Senator BACK: Are these gensets, particularly in the fly-away transmitters, which I imagine are the ones you are talking about, run on diesel or petrol?

Mr James: Diesel generally, and most of them are on the existing transmitter sites, not just on the fly-aways.

Senator BACK: What is the problem with underground fuel storage?

Mr James: The problem we have is limited capacity—24 hours typically, some of them up to a week—and the need to replenish that and refresh that diesel. The more critical question is a short supply in the event of a long power failure. Once we get past the point of capacity, we need supply. In any emergency where there is a

widespread power failure there is high demand for diesel fuel. At the moment, broadcasters have no higher call on that than the local trucking operator or the local hospital, although I have no objection to the hospital getting their fair share.

Senator BACK: So you would not object to this committee making a recommendation that, in circumstances like that, you would join the highest priority for supply of diesel fuel.

Mr James: I would like to see that as a requirement, yes.

Senator BACK: It would specify diesel fuel, because I would not want petrol tankers going into areas.

Mr James: No, it is diesel fuel that is the critical one.

CHAIR: Mr Ward, have you anything to add to that?

Mr Ward: I would endorse Mr James's statements and also say that that would be an important issue from our perspective as well. We have found the resilience of AM radio broadcasting during an emergency to be one of the key aspects of our role. The two greatest problems that can occur are that, first, the site is hit by the disaster itself, such as a fire or flood, and therefore you lose the transmitter; but the far more likely one, the longer an emergency goes on, is that a power supply problem will occur and once you lose electricity you go to the generator backup and you have a fuel problem. I know during the Brisbane floods one of our real issues for a few days was just this point, of wrangling to make sure that we had a fuel supply in the situation that power is turned off in central Brisbane and we were not able to transmit. So the issue of having access like that is of critical importance, I agree.

ACTING CHAIR: Do you have diesel generator backup for all your major transmission areas?

Mr Ward: It is Broadcast Australia's transmission facility. All of the A class, that is, the major sites, do have a generator backup facility and then the only issue that arises is where there is a problem with the generator or you run out of fuel.

ACTING CHAIR: They are not like the Japanese nuclear power stations where they are placed in an area that makes them inoperable, are they?

Mr James: We hope not.

Mr Ward: It is interesting that in the Victorian bushfires a television transmitter and FM radio transmitter were affected directly, hit by the fires, whereas the AM transmitters tended to be much safer. I think that is because they are in much wider open spaces, whereas the FM and television transmitters are up on much heavier timbered country.

Senator BACK: I will certainly urge the committee in that direction. One of the comments I wrote down before you came, Mr James, was the statement that 'the radio must be on to be effective'. You then came along and spoke to us about there being the capacity for emergency messages when a radio is off. Do you know the basis of that technology and how readily it could be implemented in Australia?

Mr James: It has been developed by the Asian broadcasting union, particularly in conjunction with the Japanese broadcasters. They established it as a standard about two years ago. The Japanese have been using an earlier version of it for some years. My only concern about implementing it in Australia would be that it probably adds a few dollars to the cost of a radio, but given that we are moving to digital radios anyway a few dollars on $100 is relatively small.

Dr Sutton: While I am not exactly a technician I had an explanation of it when I visited the NHK labs in Tokyo. Essentially it requires a very thin sliver of broadcasting spectrum to carry a signal that is able to wake up the device. You then need to have the necessary chip set in the device to respond to that signal. It would add a cost and would have to be effectively inserted into radios across the country, so there would be a fairly substantial replacement that would be required.

Senator BACK: But it could be added in the original version of new radios?

Dr Sutton: Yes.

Senator BACK: And one would expect that those with technological savvy would be able to link that up to various other warning systems, such as flashing lights and sirens, in the homes of those who have some form of disability.

Mr James: That sort of thing is certainly the intent of the technology.

Senator HUMPHRIES: That is what the Yellow Bird technology is all about, which is commercially available in Australia at the moment. It is a question of whether the various agencies responsible for administering it want to take it up.

Senator BOYCE: Have you had any discussions with or sought the views of civil libertarians or consumers around that technology?

Mr James: No.

Dr Sutton: No.

Senator BACK: Mr Rasmussen, from our own experience through our summer fire season, there are standard messages perhaps every 30 minutes on ABC radio. What is the capacity for special messages to be broadcast? Is that relatively seamless? If every 30 minutes were inadequate or if there were a special risk, is it seamless that on-air broadcasters can have that message and, with a fair degree of freedom, get that out to the wider community?

Mr Rasmussen: Yes, once we go into an emergency mode it is very easy for us to keep that going, and we would have staff available in our radio stations to go live and continue live as the need is. Because it is all happening live, they are able to broadcast those messages at whatever frequency they are required or we are instructed to by the emergency services.

Senator BACK: Sure. I have to compliment you: I do not know if it is exclusive to WA, but clearly your on-air staff receive media training prior to the fire seasons, because the message is consistent and people become used to the noise warning, whatever it is called—the audible warning—in advance of it. I think it was you, or perhaps Mr James, who made the observation that there are some states in which these emergencies tend to be annual and therefore people are more automatically tuned into it, including those in towns and cities. How do you overcome that education challenge? Bushfires are an example. I will not get into the cycle of bushfires. In Victoria and other places they clearly are not annual. We have the fortune, or misfortune, to have them annually. That is why our volunteers are so well attuned to radio communications and to putting fires out—because they occur every year. In other places—Tasmania is a prime example—you might not have a major bushfire for donkey's years. What is the process whereby you can keep the community engaged in terms of listening to the emergency warning messages that go out over radio?

Mr Rasmussen: Our approach is that we are with our communities before, during and after emergencies. In the 'before' part in particular, we make a point of seasonally running education campaigns through various short promotions on the radio at a regular frequency so that we are educating people to what that alert sounds like on the radio, what they should do when they hear it, how they can prepare their homes, how they can prepare an escape plan and things like that. We run those in the lead-up to seasonal events like cyclones and the bushfire seasons, and all our stations run those on a regular basis in the lead-up to what might be a time when people will need to know that information. Hopefully they will not need to put it into practice, but we certainly run promotional campaigns in that 'before' period.

Senator BACK: I have a last question. In this 'radio off' scenario, if an emergency sparks the radio to turn on, it does not matter what station—AM, FM, commercial or, in the case of Australia, national? It does not matter? It just comes on?

Mr James: Across the board, yes.

Senator BACK: It would be a great selling point, wouldn't it?

Senator McKENZIE: It is not just WA, Senator Back. ABC Gippsland, during the bushfires in my own home town's area, were fantastic. So well done on the information and support during that time. You are right: it is in the recovery of those communities that the ABC has a clear role to play. My question, I guess, is about regional youth.

ACTING CHAIR: You should tell some of your colleagues about this during estimates!

Senator McKENZIE: I will be happy to!

Senator BOYCE: There is always room for improvement!

Senator McKENZIE: Save it for October, peepz!

Senator HUMPHRIES: There was a good atmosphere until you made that comment!

Senator McKENZIE: Regional youth love their Triple J, and I have been through the transition, at about 30, from Triple J to my local ABC. I am just wondering what role Triple J has to play—I am not sure whether it happens—to let regional young people know that they have to switch off and turn over during those events. What is the process that happens there?

Mr Rasmussen: One of the things that we learned from the bushfires in Victoria was that some people were not listening to their local stations. I do not know whether you saw the *Four Corners* program on the bushfires, but a fellow was listening to ABC Classic FM and the first thing he knew about the fires approaching him was

when they came over the nearest ridge. Following that, we have been having discussions with our network colleagues about trigger points whereby we would actually insert into those other services information that something is going to be happening in this particular region and you need to start listening to your local ABC, giving the frequency and that type of thing. It has some challenges because those other services are national and hiving off those transmitters requires some technical nous, or we just put up with the fact that people in Perth might hear a warning that is directed at people in Victoria. That may just be a trade-off that we are willing to make to give people the appropriate warnings. We are looking at mechanisms whereby we can get information on Triple J, Classic FM, Radio National and those national services to say what is happening in a particular region and people need to immediately listen to their local service if they are in that region.

Senator McKENZIE: When you are talking about the information flow between emergency services being current and up-to-date and where that fell down, was that happening because you were getting feedback straight from the ground, if you like, through your listeners and that was not necessarily marrying that central command and control which was happening at a much further distance from the actual issue? Is that where you think it might have happened, or do you have any other ideas?

Mr Rasmussen: With regard to taking listener calls, our broadcasters have to exercise a degree of caution because 'expert' advice from our listeners is not to be trusted, because they are not experts. We actually want to confirm with the emergency services what the advice is for people to do. If a person is seeing a fire coming over the ridge at them, we are cautious about putting it to air because it might not involve the right advice about where to go. They might be saying it is coming from east to west and it is moving at a particular speed, so we try to vet those calls and match up what we are hearing from our listeners with what we are hearing from the emergency services.

Senator McKENZIE: Does that cause any delay or cause an issue with expectation? Have you had any feedback around that?

Mr Rasmussen: Because we do take it seriously and we want to get it right, sometimes it does cause a delay.

Senator McKENZIE: We have been hearing from disability groups about their access to information at times of emergency. Does the SBS's linguistic diversity cover Auslan?

Mr James: No, it does not. We cover 68 languages but not Auslan, I am afraid. We suffer the same dilemma that the ABC suffers—our radio network is national so we are largely limited to pointing people back to the ABC in the case of emergency. We do hold an important role in educating people, particularly new arrivals, on the bushfires and cyclones and things that they are not necessarily familiar with, and we do take that quite seriously.

ACTING CHAIR: In the case of an emergency, is there any coordination between SBS, ABC and the commercial stations?

Mr Rasmussen: It is largely done individually, I would say. As I said, there are areas where we can call on each other's assistance if need be.

Senator BOYCE: About whether you decide to stay on air—

Mr James: The technical coordination is very good. At the engineering level there is a lot of coordination to stay on air and keep things alive.

ACTING CHAIR: So the coordination is technical coordination as distinct from broadcasting coordination?

Mr James: With broadcasting coordination our guys probably listen to the ABC to find out the latest details, if they have not got it coming in on the telephone.

Senator McKENZIE: We have been talking about radio a lot and, clearly, my previous question about Auslan was not directed at radios. I ask the ABC: when you are broadcasting during emergencies for TV, have you thought about Auslan cooperation?

Mr Ward: Yes, we have thought about it. In fact, we have had some approaches since the Queensland floods. There are a number of issues, though, that need to be taken into account. You may recall that, during the floods, someone was providing Auslan signing at some of the broadcasts during the Queensland floods.

Senator BOYCE: That was at the Premier's and the police commissioner's press conferences?

Mr Ward: That is right. But there was also some criticism that, at times, the framing of the coverage did not include the person doing the signing. Just to go back to your question about cooperation, one point of cooperation is shared footage, pooled footage, so not every broadcaster is at every point and will share the footage from a news conference, for example. If another broadcaster has framed it in such a way that it has left the signing out, then clearly we would not be able to broadcast it. There was also a request to look at picture and picture kind of signing. There are two difficulties with that. So, at this stage, all I have is difficulties for you. It is certainly one

that we are talking through. The difficulties concern spectrum. You require more spectrum and, currently, spectrum is at a premium. Secondly, you would have—

Senator BOYCE: That is something for the picture and picture?

Mr Ward: That is right, but not if it is live. One of the things here is guaranteeing that service. If we say we are going to do it, then we will do it. So we could not say we are going to do it, then take someone else's pool of footage live from an event, for example, and not have it. That would be a real problem for us. So the kind of technology solution starts to present itself. Spectrum issues arise and so, too, would the availability of someone who is able to do the signing at another point. Then there is the cost of providing that. At this stage it is in, if not the too-hard basket, certainly the very difficult basket and I do not quite know how to solve it. Plus, of course, all of that coverage is captured and live captioned.

Senator BOYCE: And open captions—

Mr Ward: Captioning is almost continually available now. We can guarantee having that for any event such as this. We can bring it on online almost immediately. That is our immediate solution, whilst we have a longer term look at Auslan and the signing issue.

Senator BOYCE: Mr James, you do open captions?

Mr James: We do open captions on anything that is in a language other than English and we do closed captions on all the prime-time English material.

Senator BOYCE: Why do you make that distinction?

Mr James: At the moment, the English speakers do not particularly want the open captions up all the time.

Senator BOYCE: So, because of consumer feedback, you have chosen not to do that?

Mr Ward: Ours are closed captions. You have to turn them on.

Senator BOYCE: Closed captions?

Mr Ward: Yes. Fortunately, with technology these days, it is a single switch.

Senator BOYCE: It is just that there is probably a significant part of the community who do not have a hearing problem—it is just that everyone else in the world mutters—who possibly would benefit from captions, even though they may choose not to ask for captions.

Mr James: You can turn it off. All the new TVs have it built in.

Senator BOYCE: I might just follow up on the Auslan and the caption issues which were raised. One of the questions that was raised was: who should pay for the Auslan interpreters? What do the ABC and SBS say about that? You might very well have the situation where you have someone, or a group of interpreters, working for perhaps 10, 12 hours straight, so that would be quite an expensive exercise.

ACTING CHAIR: Surely, it is in the overall budget—it is not really that huge!

Mr Ward: I will start, and say that I think it is the logistics of this issue that have stymied us as much as anything. You are right: the cost would be an issue, and we spend several million dollars on captioning already. To have another unfunded cost added to that would be an issue.

Looking at this issue, for me it is about the logistics. The most practical way that I can see that Auslan can be delivered, for example, is if it is delivered by the service that is providing the information when they provide the information. As broadcasters, we can then look at how we can commit to make sure that that information is provided as part of the broadcast.

Just putting aside who pays for it for a moment, if it comes down to the broadcaster having the responsibility to organise it to be delivered it just adds a degree of logistical difficulty in what are already pretty complex circumstances.

Senator BOYCE: But would the situation not be—let's take that Brisbane situation, where the police commissioner and the premier used an Auslan interpreter all the time—that if you were doing a news broadcast, for instance, you would have your news person speaking and then go to look at some of the press conference. It would not give someone who needed Auslan a complete picture. The news service itself would need to be interpreted, would it not?

Mr Ward: Now you are moving into the area of whether we would provide Auslan as a broader service, and I think that is something that we have not considered. We think that captioning is the best way to provide that service for people who are deaf and hearing impaired.

Senator BOYCE: Okay. And SBS?

Mr James: Likewise. It is a non-trivial cost. Thinking about it, it would make far more sense if there were one Auslan interpreter at a press conference, like the premier had, rather than each broadcaster having to do it.

Senator BOYCE: Yes.

Mr James: But having Auslan interpreters on standby in the event of an emergency would be an expensive exercise.

Senator BOYCE: Okay, thank you. Can I check that every household in Australia has the capacity to receive ABC radio—is that correct? Are there any areas at all that do not, or cannot?

Mr Ward: There are some. There are some areas that have reception problems and there are some areas that receive their radio services by satellite—remote area broadcasts. So there is a small number of people in that—I am just trying to think of the numbers. We have quoted that 99.4 per cent of the population can receive a local radio signal, but there is a small number of people who cannot, particularly those living in black spots or areas with reception problems.

That would be known to them; they would know they have a problem with their reception, and that is an issue going back to the kinds of questions and discussions around preparation—

Senator BOYCE: Is there, to your knowledge, any plan that decides how communications are delivered to people in those black spots, or do they simply need to have worked out another system for themselves?

Dr Sutton: A proportion of them are reached with the Remote Area Broadcasting Service satellite—RABS. That is, in a sense, the default way to try to cover remote communities. It does not get all of them, though, and I am not clear on how that hooks into our emergency broadcasts either.

Mr Ward: The only solution is for people to look to ways of addressing their reception problems. As I said, it is a small number of people who know they have reception issues. Going to AM radio, the biggest problem is that people have an indoor aerial and cannot receive the signal with an indoor aerial. That is where we say that as part of the preparations and the education campaign, 'You may very well need an external aerial to make sure that you have certainty around the signal'.

Senator BOYCE: Perhaps it might be useful if you could just give us a list of those black spots on notice? Mr James, do you have any comments around accessibility? I realise that SBS is not quite as—

Mr James: We have a lot more black spots! But we do, and have, worked very hard with the ABC and the other broadcasters to put up the new satellite service that does provide a comprehensive range of SBS radio services. All 68 languages are up there. We also put our radio services onto our digital television, because we have a wider reach of television than we do radio, which gives people an option. It is not the ideal option—it is not battery backed up; it is not sitting in the kitchen—but at least they have an option.

Senator BOYCE: A lot of migrants are being encouraged to move into country areas currently. What issues, if any, is this causing for you in terms of trying to see that you get appropriate language warnings into appropriate areas?

Mr James: It is a point of much concern to SBS that to date we have only had funding for the major capital cities plus Newcastle-Wollongong and we do not reach with high-power services into any of the regions. We have cooperated with, I think, 111 small communities to put in self-help transmitters, but the local community pay for at least the operation of those. We would dearly love to have funding to provide transmission across the country.

Senator BOYCE: Presumably this is being driven by the proportion of non-English-speaking people in a particular community. How many other communities are there out there that should have similar, in SBS's view?

Mr James: I would suggest it is probably in excess of 100, but I would have to take that on notice.

Senator BOYCE: If you could, that would be good. Thank you.

ACTING CHAIR: Isn't there Viewer Access Satellite Television now? Does that help? SBS goes out on that as well, doesn't it?

Mr James: Yes. We do provide a complete, comprehensive range of digital television, radio and all the analog radio services on that. We are exploring putting the extra two digital radio services up there as well at the moment. It does fill in pretty well all the black spots. The only people that cannot get that are living in deep valleys where they cannot see the satellite, so they are down into the hundreds, not thousands.

ACTING CHAIR: But the satellite actually spots out areas of poor receiving—

Mr James: The satellite covers the whole of the Australian continent. In SBS's case, we transmit seven versions of SBS into, effectively, each state, so we can narrow it down to a state base. We do not go any smaller than that on the VAST service, and I do not think the ABC do either. They are state based also.

ACTING CHAIR: I am confused. Why would you have to go to a self-help terrestrial transmitter?

Mr James: The communities that have chosen to put in the self-help transmitter have come to the conclusion that it is going to be cheaper for them to have a terrestrial transmitter rather than everyone having to go and buy a satellite receiver. In our case, populations of between 3,000 and a couple of hundred are the ones that choose to put in a self-help transmitter. It also means that, in a radio sense, it is available on the tractor, in the car, in the kitchen, whereas a satellite receiver is generally attached to the lounge room.

ACTING CHAIR: As there are no further questions, we thank you very much for your help. It has been very informative. As acting chair, I should also indicate the appreciation that everyone here has for the work you have done over these last trying periods in Australia.

BRIMBLE, Ms Holly, Director, Legal and Broadcast Policy, Free TV Australia

FLYNN, Ms Julie, Chief Executive Officer, Free TV Australia

[15:09]

ACTING CHAIR: I welcome representatives from Free TV Australia. Thank you for talking to us today. The committee has received your submission as submission 16. Do you wish to make any amendments or alterations to your submission?

Ms Flynn: No, we do not.

ACTING CHAIR: Do you wish to make a brief opening statement before we go to questions?

Ms Flynn: Yes, please. Thank you for the opportunity to appear before the committee. Commercial free-to-air broadcasters take very seriously their role in the dissemination of critical emergency information. We have close working relationships with local emergency services and have put in place very efficient processes for the rapid receipt and broadcast of emergency information. The value that arises from these relationships was evident in recent detailed and significant news coverage of the Queensland and Victorian floods and Cyclone Yasi.

One of the things that broadcasters find particularly useful in the days leading up to an anticipated emergency such as Yasi is the availability of regular press briefings that provide real and useful information that can be disseminated to the community. Broadcasters break into regular programming to show these briefings. It is very important that state services work closely with commercial television to ensure those briefings occur and that they provide useful information to people such as how to prepare and what to do. When I say 'commercial broadcasters' I obviously mean the national broadcaster as well. In fact, there is actually a very detailed amount of cooperation between the broadcasters which I can give you a little bit more detail on later.

At the federal level Free TV Australia has supported the development of national guidelines for the broadcast of emergency warnings and has liaised extensively over the last three years with the Attorney-General's Department on their implementation. These guidelines set down a consistent set of national processes for cooperation between emergency management services and all media sectors. We strongly support a national approach. We are national broadcasters and a standardised, consistent national approach across the community is very helpful to us as broadcasters and to the community.

These processes are backed up by a range of regulatory requirements designed to ensure the timely and accurate broadcast of emergency information to their licensee's local community, and all free-to-air commercial broadcasters comply with these requirements at a minimum. There are requirements in the industry's code of practice which ensure licensees have adequate procedures in place to enable prompt and accurate broadcast of emergency information. The code includes requirements to consult with emergency and essential service organisations within their licensed area and to implement internal procedures to enable the dissemination of emergency information. The code also includes an appendix dealing specifically with the broadcast of emergency information, providing further guidance to licensees on their responsibilities and the need to develop and maintain effective lines of communication with emergency service organisations.

In our formal submission we briefly touched on the issues surrounding continued access to the 2.5 gigahertz spectrum band in which broadcasters are licensed to provide electronic news gathering. That includes all broadcasters and not just commercial broadcasters, although I think it is only the ABC and the commercials that actually have the electronic news-gathering services. SBS does not. Television broadcasters use the 2.5 gigahertz band to transmit television coverage of program content outside the production studio back to the studio facility for inclusion in a program for broadcast. Broadcasters rely on the spectrum for rapid and unplanned deployment of radio frequency video links to cover live news events. As such, it plays an essential role in broadcasters' coverage of national disasters.

Governments have made a decision—and that is governments of both kinds in this country—to repurpose the majority of this spectrum for auction to mobile broadband providers. This is in line with the international standards that were set back in 2000. Whilst the media regulator, the Australian Communications and Media Authority, is coordinating a process to identify alternative spectrum for ENG, we felt this issue was worth noting for the committee given the importance of ENG spectrum in covering national disasters and emergency situations.

Senator BACK: In terms of emergency circumstances, is it anything other than moral persuasion that would cause the various operators to actually take an emergency services message into their broadcast? The question is: an emergency service may determine that it is an emergency but it could be the closing minutes of a Bledisloe Cup game, so who gets priority?

Ms Flynn: That is up to the individual broadcaster to determine. I have been a news director in a radio newsroom. I was a political correspondent in this town for a long time for 2UE and for the ABC before that. I was the news director at 2UE for a number of years. Although I have not worked in a television newsroom I have a very detailed familiarity with what happens in a commercial radio newsroom and they are not too different. Under those circumstances a decision would normally be made within the broadcast scenario. You would get a stream running underneath advising you and at the first available opportunity for a break you would get the actual announcement.

Senator BACK: Do all free to air—can I use that term?

Ms Flynn: Commercial free to air.

Senator BACK: Do all of them have the tape or do all of them have the capacity?

Ms Flynn: They all have the capacity, as I understand it. I cannot speak for all of the regionals on whether they could do it immediately or not, but they all have a capacity. Can I just give you some examples of what we did do, not what we might do?

Senator BACK: Yes.

Ms Flynn: For instance, we spoke to the editorial manager at Channel 9 about the Victorian bushfires in February this year, who told us it was a difficult emergency to cover because it was not anticipated and the extent of the crisis was not immediately known. However, as soon as there was information to hand on the night of the bushfires, Nine Network commenced coverage with a 15-minute news bulletin on the fires at 9 pm. A one-hour news special was aired on the Sunday night and then on the Monday Nine provided significant ongoing coverage. The *Today* show was extended to 11 am for the week following the fires with regular news updates throughout the day. Evening news bulletins were extended to one hour with additional coverage for each of the four nights following the disaster. Significant coverage was provided for about two weeks following the event. All of the resources from GTV—and this is something I can testify to at commercial radio or news: we might not have the same numbers of staff available to us as the national broadcasters, but it is an all-hands-on-deck operation so that people who might not normally even work in news get thrown into making sure the coverage happens.

In Queensland with the floods, Channel 10's news editor in Brisbane reported to us that they provided rolling coverage on dates of critical events such as 13 January with regular news updates. Significant coverage was provided from then on. Most of the people working in the 10 newsroom were working 13 hours days with staff coming from other stations all around the country. On one particular day in a news bulletin there were 42 stories, up from a normal day of 12 or so. Journalists and crews were dispatched throughout the regions to cover particular areas hit by the disaster. Channel 10 had at least 100 people on the ground throughout Queensland at the height of the crisis.

On Channel 7, which is also responsible for Seven Queensland, their director of news in Maroochydore said that they provided continuous rolling coverage on Cyclone Yasi commencing on the day before it was due to reach the Queensland coast. Several high-profile journalists and broadcasters, such as the *Sunrise* team, were sent to report live from the zone. Seven Network used their local infrastructure base in Maroochydore to anchor their coverage, drawing on the local knowledge they had in Far North Queensland. The local office linked in closely with crews and journalists from metropolitan offices who arrived to cover the story. All the links were done from the digital video network in Maroochydore. The infrastructure was also removed enough to be protected from the damaging effects of the cyclone.

CHAIR: Ms Flynn, I see you are reading from a document. Do you want to just table that document?

Ms Flynn: I can make it available to you afterwards. These are just some notes for me, but I can give them to you. I would need to check with the people who gave me the information first.

CHAIR: It would be good if you could put that in a form that you could table.

Ms Flynn: I am happy to do that.

Senator BACK: I should have pre-empted my questions with a full acknowledgement and appreciation of everybody in the media, and I say that from having been involved in an emergency service. There is no doubt at all that it is always exemplary. It is also the case that in most instances it is also very newsworthy, and that is in no way diminishing the enthusiasm or the capacity of a lot of people.

Ms Flynn: It is also extremely expensive.

Senator BACK: Yes, it is.

Ms Flynn: People do not just do it.

Senator BACK: That is right. Also, especially in the commercial sphere, you have obligations to sponsors. Sponsors may themselves be fully supportive of such a move, or they may not. The idea of the running bar at the bottom of the screen appeals to me. I am looking at it from the viewpoint of someone who has responsibility for getting the emergency service message out. It is absolutely critical, if the message goes out and you have an expectation that it is going to appear on any medium, be it radio, television or Twitter, that if it does not or if it is not going to then you must have a loop back.

Ms Flynn: We would never not run it. I am not aware of any circumstances in my personal professional experience where a message has not been run. It might not be run exactly when the person wanted it to be run, and that is because sometimes stations are in relay and they do not have the capacity. The control over how and when is an issue. We have very productive relationships with emergency services.

Senator BACK: That probably goes to my question, in a sense. You are right—you do operate under relay, and I think on weekends particularly, and for whatever reason most emergencies seem to occur on weekends—

Ms Flynn: And public holidays.

Senator BACK: And public holidays. And they nearly all occur at the junction of maps. You will find that nearly all emergencies happen in the corner of maps. But there is a concern that, for example, a feed may be taken out of Adelaide or Sydney and the problem is occurring in the Northern Territory or in Brisbane—

Senator BILYK: Or in Tasmania.

Senator BACK: Or in Tasmania. These are reasonable questions. In the event that emergency services are to move to and rely on these, they need to know about the timeliness and the sorts of messages. They are really the questions I am asking about.

Ms Flynn: My understanding of how this works is that most of those local areas have relationships with the local broadcasters, whether they are radio or television, and there is a capacity to get a message out. It might not be immediate, as I said, but there is a line of communication. One of the issues that I have discussed with the Attorney-General's process is having an adequate list, a database—and we can do that now—of who all these emergency services people are and who the contacts are at the broadcaster. A database of that kind could be set up and established—and I know for a fact that we went through all of this here in the press gallery back in the early nineties when we had the first Gulf War. The defence department was establishing contacts so that when something happened there was a process and you could get in touch. You had a known person in the newsroom; you had a known person at the defence department. The same applies with emergency services.

What happens over time is that Joe Bloggs moves on and Mary Jane comes in to replace him, at either end, and nobody knows that the change has been made. The information is stored in someone's brain. That person moves on and the information is lost. It may be written down somewhere. There may be some sort of process, and there usually are manuals in newsrooms about these things. But a database that the states contributed to, that the Commonwealth contributed to and that broadcasters of all kinds contributed to I think would solve a lot of the issues that you are concerned about. If you know that I am sitting on the other end of the phone and that my telephone number is XYZ and you can ring me 24/7, you are going to pick up the phone and ring me and I am going to answer it.

Senator BACK: That is correct. My final question is in relation to fire grounds, but only as one example. It is one of those things that could well put media people at risk. I am now not talking about communications from a central headquarters somewhere; I am talking about media personnel going out to the site of an emergency. It is necessary for the emergency services to coordinate clearly and well in advance with the media, even to the extent of providing, for example, basic training in fire behaviour, information about clothing—so that they do not turn up in clothing that would put them more at risk than if they had stayed in the car—and warnings about the use of a petrol vehicle attending an emergency, because the petrol vapourises and all of sudden the person reporting on an emergency or disaster becomes the actual news. Are we improving yet in that planning process?

Ms Flynn: I think we are. I think there has been a lot of movement over the last 15 to 20 years. I could tell you some hair-raising stories going back a bit further.

Senator BACK: You do not need to.

Ms Flynn: I know we nearly lost a police roundsman at 2UE in the early 1990s. He managed to completely floor his vehicle in a national park and was not able to get out. When I was at 2UE in the lead-up to the Sydney Olympics we had a very close working relationship with the fire brigade. Those relationships continue, as I understand, to this day. In every television newsroom the news directors operate in very similar ways. There is a lot of informal contact between the emergency services and the newsrooms, so when you get to an emergency you know exactly who the person is on the other end of the phone. If you are the person on duty trying to find out

from the emergency services what is happening, you already know that person. There is a lot of contact that happens across a whole range of different things. My experience is—and this is mainly in New South Wales, but I know that it happens in Queensland and Victoria as well—that there are times when the local police, for instance, will call together all the news directors around some of these issues and protocols are put in place. Some of these protocols are formal and some are informal. That is why I think the database thing is a really good idea, because everybody then knows exactly who is where. It then needs to be constantly updated. That would be a recommendation worthwhile for the committee to consider.

Senator BACK: It is the cadet journalist and the kid on work experience who are the ones most at risk.

Ms Flynn: And it is the news directors' responsibility to make sure they do not put them at risk.

ACTING CHAIR: That is interesting. I might come to that. In terms of coordination and communication, I suppose the emergency services say, 'We do emergency services,' whereas free-to-air television says, 'We are broadcasters.' What needs to happen to get both parties together?

Ms Flynn: I do not think there is a problem. I am not aware of a problem between us and the emergency services.

ACTING CHAIR: I am not saying that there is. I do not want you to be defensive about this; I am not criticising. I am saying you have raised the issue about better coordination. All I am saying is: would it be beneficial for free-to-air TV, including maybe ABC and SBS, to come together for a couple of days with key people to work through some of the issues you are talking about and come up with some recommendations proactively?

Ms Flynn: I think we have been doing that for the last three years. In fact, we have been involved with national emergency services more frequently than that, and at least once a year there is a whole seminar that runs for a day or two and has a dinner at night. It is extensive. That is the process in which we raised the database. I think the question around the database is: who would pay for it. The states do not want to pay for it.

ACTING CHAIR: I do not want to know who pays for the dinner, but I am interested in the processes you are talking about because it seems from other evidence we have had that people do their own thing, that there is a lack of coordination.

Ms Flynn: I can only talk to you about my personal experience and my professional experience in this role. We have been active participants—and not the only active participants—in this national emergency broadcast warning process through the Attorney-General's Department and I am happy to provide the committee with the contacts in the Attorney-General's Department.

ACTING CHAIR: So you say the A-G brings—

Ms Flynn: The Attorney-General's Department operates—

ACTING CHAIR: I am just trying to pin down this forum that you go to where you have the dinner. Is that an Attorney-General's initiative?

Ms Flynn: Yes. It is the National Guidelines and Broadcast Levels Chart for the Broadcast of Emergency Public Warnings.

ACTING CHAIR: Does that happen regularly?

Ms Flynn: Yes, very regularly.

Senator BILYK: Just to clarify, is that a day or two of training?

Ms Flynn: It is a day or two. It is seminars and exchanges of information. It might include the head of the fire brigade or the police department. There is a range of players from emergency services from all the states and the Commonwealth.

Senator BILYK: Are you telling us that the flow of information is fine?

Ms Flynn: There are always issues in the heat of an emergency about availability. As you say, the emergency services are doing their thing and we are doing our thing. But we have been very actively involved in this process at a national level to try to get, as much as we can, these processes into a state in which there is regular communication between the players and consistency around the rules and protocols that apply, which I think is really critical.

ACTING CHAIR: Could you give us the name of that organisation again?

Ms Flynn: It is the development of the National Guidelines and Broadcast Levels Chart for the Broadcast of Emergency Public Warnings. I have a copy of the guidelines here, which I am happy to present.

ACTING CHAIR: If there are no objections, I ask the committee to table that document.

Senator BILYK: Do all broadcasters work to that?

Ms Flynn: I cannot speak for everybody else.

ACTING CHAIR: Have recommendations come from these meetings—or outcomes and targets?

Ms Flynn: Yes. You will see that the document has developed a series of protocols.

Senator McKENZIE: Other than on weekends, when some stations are in relay mode—is that right?—

Ms Flynn: It is not just on weekends for some stations.

Senator McKENZIE: Other than a relay, for the free-to-air TV are your members happy with looking at the warning about an impending emergency rather than have reporting on the emergency?

Ms Flynn: We already publish broadcasts on impending emergencies.

Senator McKENZIE: I am just wondering what the process is and whether everybody is on board with the same thing: if there is an emergency, then this is what happens.

Ms Flynn: I am also prepared to table, for your benefit, the code-of-practice requirements and the appendix that appears in our code of practice, if the committee is happy with that.

ACTING CHAIR: If there are no objections, it is so tabled.

Ms Brimble: Those requirements make sure that broadcasters have procedures in place for contacts with local emergency services to ensure that once the information comes in it goes out as quickly as possible.

Senator McKENZIE: Thank you. Perhaps I could just follow up on the same questions I asked the public broadcasters, about Auslan and the closed or open captioning during emergency.

Ms Flynn: There is closed captioning. We cannot do open captioning. There are technical reasons for that. To be a little bit clearer than perhaps they were, we all provide closed captioning at great expense. We now have 80 per cent take-up of digital television; it is growing by the hour, fortunately. A lot of time and effort has gone into working with the deaf and hearing impaired communities over time to develop those closed captioning rules. The government is currently preparing new legislation to implement higher levels of closed captioning. We are already working through the HREOC process to provide, in advance of what we are legislated to provide—

Senator McKENZIE: Sorry—what process is that? I am not up with the acronym.

Ms Flynn: HREOC is the Australian Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission. Perhaps I could give you some history—although it might bore you!

Back in 2000 the government passed digital television legislation that determined that we would have to provide certain amounts of closed captioning. That included in prime time and in all news bulletins. The deaf and hearing impaired community then went to HREOC and asked for higher amounts of captioning than that which we were legislated and obliged to deliver. We got an exemption under HREOC discussions after negotiating extensively with the community including commissioning our own research which we paid for on behalf of all the broadcasters. I should say all the broadcasters—all the free-to-air ones—worked together collectively on this issue. We went through a second process and got a further extension so that I think we are now up to about 85 per cent programming between 6 am and midnight. Is that answering the question?

Senator McKENZIE: That is fine. I was just wondering about the emergency aspect.

Ms Brimble: First up, it is important to note that under the Broadcasting Services Act we are required to provide captions for all news programming and the majority of the coverage of emergencies happens within a news program or a news bulletin, so that is already required to be provided with closed captions. Where we provide a short community service style announcement, our code ensures that we provide all relevant and vital information on the screen as well as verbally. There will normally be a map, some phone numbers and key information. Our broadcasters ensure that that is available visually as well as in the spoken form so that both deaf and hearing impaired viewers and blind and visually impaired viewers can have access to that information.

Senator McKENZIE: Thank you for that.

Ms Flynn: So we do not see that open captioning is required on top of what we already have with provisions within the code. On Auslan, we are very strongly of the view that if the emergency service provider or the police or the Queensland Premier or the New South Wales Premier or the Victorian Premier wish to provide Auslan coverage we will make sure that it is within frame. That did not happen at the beginning of the Queensland floods. As a I have said, we have a very close working relationship with the hearing and deaf community and they got in touch with me—I was on holidays—and I got in touch with the broadcasters and within the hour the matter was

repaired. So we are more than happy to ensure that processes are in place for Auslan to be captured. We think it is totally impractical to expect broadcasters to provide such and we certainly would not support the need for the provision of such in the news bulletins when we are already legislated to provide closed captioning.

ACTING CHAIR: Before we go to Senator Humphries, I refer to this latest document that you have tabled. I see point 1.31 says:

... A Licensee will review and, where necessary, update procedures annually in consultation with appropriate emergency and essential service organisations pursuant to Clause 1.28.1.

Then it outlines, at 1.28.1, what you have to do. Are there any minutes or outcomes that you can table or provide?

Ms Flynn: These would be matters for individual licensees and, no, I do not have any details.

ACTING CHAIR: So you do not—

Ms Flynn: It is not a requirement for them to report to Free TV. We helped develop the code but that is basically a matter for them and the emergency services. I am not aware of any difficulties between emergency services and individual broadcasters. In fact, it is quite the opposite.

ACTING CHAIR: There probably would not be if—

Ms Flynn: But we would be; they would let us know quick smart, I can assure you. There are lots of circumstances where we develop protocols and things.

ACTING CHAIR: But I am interested in this review.

Ms Flynn: It says 'where necessary', and I am not aware of any issues that have arisen. As I have said, we have had the ongoing process through the Attorney-General's Department over the last three or four years. I think it might even be longer than that, but it is certainly over the last three years. At a state level I am just not aware of any issues that have arisen. If you look at the coverage of all the recent major crises, I think all of the broadcasters have erred on the side of providing.

ACTING CHAIR: I am not really worried about the coverage, to the extent that coverage becomes editorialising. What we are interested in is warnings and the capacity to provide warnings. I would have thought that after the major floods and the major bushfires that we have had—

Ms Flynn: I will check—

ACTING CHAIR: Let me finish, Ms Flynn.

Ms Flynn: Sorry.

ACTING CHAIR: Is this the act?

Ms Flynn: No, this is the code of practice.

ACTING CHAIR: I would have thought that for this part of the code of practice there would have been some lessons learnt and something that might assist us. Could you ask your individual members as to what process they have undertaken arising from the floods and the bushfires, whether 1.31 has been undertaken and what outcomes and lessons have arisen from this review that takes place annually? I would have thought that if no lessons have been learnt over the last 12 months then there probably never will be any. I would just like to know what happened.

Ms Flynn: I am certainly happy to ask. As I said, this will be a matter for individual broadcasters. I am not aware—

ACTING CHAIR: I am happy for us to write to individual broadcasters but, given you are the—

Ms Flynn: No, we will ask them and we will undertake to come back on their behalf.

ACTING CHAIR: Good on you. Thanks.

Senator HUMPHRIES: I was listening earlier today to ACCAN, the communications—

Ms Flynn: Yes, we know who they are.

Senator HUMPHRIES: They were talking about captioning. You have mentioned already that open captioning is not technically possible.

Ms Flynn: It is not for our broadcasters.

Senator HUMPHRIES: Why is that?

Ms Flynn: There are a couple of things.

Ms Brimble: The process for preparing closed captions is undertaken by external service providers using particular software and a particular type of data. That is quite separate to the process for putting open captions up

onto a broadcast, which normally happens in the broadcast control room using a different set of software and a different system. So it would not just be a case of taking the closed caption files and sending them along to be shown in an open format; you would have to have someone sitting there separately and entering it into the system. What we say is that, because we undertake to provide closed captions for those who need them and also to provide all the important information on screen in text format, there is not really a need to also provide open captions. Further to that, the two systems that we have got for closed captions and open text are not really compatible, and it might lead to a further delay in getting the information out than what would already take place.

Ms Flynn: And in fact it might cover up some of the stuff that is already on the screen.

Senator HUMPHRIES: That is another issue, yes. But I cannot understand why, if someone is already captioning that particular broadcast for closed-captioning purposes, it is not possible to replicate that captioning additionally for open-captioning purposes.

Ms Brimble: It is the different sets of software and systems that are used for putting out closed captioning in the broadcast stream and where it is inserted in the broadcast stream. With the software and systems that are used for displaying the supertext that you see in all broadcasts, whether it be news or coverage of sport or whatever, you cannot just take the closed caption data file and feed that through to the open system.

Senator HUMPHRIES: That is just a limitation of the technology. If the broadcasting act was to say: 'You will make sure it's available in emergency situations' I am sure you could get your technicians to solve that problem, couldn't you?

Ms Brimble: I do not know. Not immediately.

Ms Flynn: Not quickly and not in a way that would be efficient. We do not think it would be efficient to have to double up on information that is already being provided and then obscure other information that is already being provided to provide something that is available to everybody. As I said, the rules are very specific about our need to have on screen both visual and audible information so that we are picking up both the hearing impaired and the visually impaired communities. We do not understand what open captioning would add to what is already provided, but it would be a significant impost on the broadcasters and it would not necessarily be efficient, either. Surely what we are trying to do here is get as much information out—as the Chair said, warnings and information are what you are on about—as quickly as possible. We think this is the most efficient system that we have operating at the present time.

Senator HUMPHRIES: ACCAN say:

Although closed captioning is mandated for news and current affairs on main channels (but not on digital multichannels), these are not always switched on in the person's home, and only very rarely in public places such as hospitals, airports and hotels, where access to captioning is beyond an individual viewer's control.

Ms Flynn: I think you will find that most people watch the main channels for this kind of information.

Senator HUMPHRIES: They also make a point about Auslan. They say:

Broadcasters too must accept their responsibilities under the Disability Discrimination Act, and ensure that Auslan/English interpreters provided at such press conferences—

like the ones Anna Bligh was doing——

are included in the broadcast.

Ms Flynn: We agree.

Senator HUMPHRIES: I have sort of implied that they were suggesting that sometimes the Auslan person is cut out of the picture.

Ms Flynn: We had never had Auslan used in Australia prior to February. As I said, it was holiday time and it was all hands to the pump. People were making decisions in a rush. Within the first couple of days someone got in touch with me. I was at home and was on my email. I got in touch with the broadcasters and we fixed it within an hour. Yes, there was a problem, but we communicated and we got it fixed. We absolutely agree that in future, given it is provided by the people holding the news conference, we will ensure that it is in frame.

Senator HUMPHRIES: So you are essentially saying to the committee that, in terms of broadcasting information on free-to-air TV in recent years, all of the issues and questions that have been raised by key stakeholders, like emergency service organisations themselves, with free-to-air TV have been resolved satisfactorily and there is no need for additional regulation to deal with the way in which the information is broadcast?

Ms Flynn: I am not aware of any outstanding issues. If the committee knows of some, I am happy to take them on board, but I am certainly not. As you can see the protocols that have been developed through the Attorney-General's process are specifically about warnings. We have been very actively engaged in this process.

Senator HUMPHRIES: Thank you.

Ms Flynn: We will take on board those matters and come back to you.

ACTING CHAIR: Thank you. You have been very helpful. We appreciate the work that free-to-air television does during times of emergency. We have to make sure that everyone does the right thing.

Ms Flynn: I would like to add one thing quickly on behalf of the 2.5-gigahertz spectrum. It is important that we have sufficient usable spectrum to be able to continue to deliver these services. The ABC said that sometimes they take a common feed, but we also share that 2.5-gigahertz spectrum between us. If there is huge demand, we coordinate our individual bits of spectrum and put them together to provide the coverage that you get.

ACTING CHAIR: So would the footage of the reporter standing at a 30-degree angle during the cyclone with bits of building flying past him have been from a 2.5-gigahertz feed?

Ms Flynn: It would have been.

ACTING CHAIR: There are properly better things you could have done with the feed I think.

Ms Flynn: I do not know who the journalist was or which channel he or she was working for. I have seen a number of broadcasters in difficult circumstances. I saw the Channel 7 broadcasters when Cyclone Yasi was happening. I saw Mel saying: 'Yes, we have been told we have to get out of here within 10 minutes. I will be gone,' and she was. We do work very closely with the local emergency services people to make sure that we are not adding to any problems that they might have.

ACTING CHAIR: In the one I saw it was more luck than good judgment that the reporter did not become a statistic.

Ms Flynn: As I said, that is a matter for the news director.

ACTING CHAIR: So we will find out who the news director was. Thank you, Ms Flynn and Ms Brimble.

Proceedings suspended from 15:50 to 16:10

BRICE, Mr Rodney Peter, Programming Operations and Regional Research Manager, Southern Cross Austereo

TAYLOR, Mr Mark Raymond, Group Program Manager, ACE Radio Broadcasters

WARNER, Ms Joan, Chief Executive Officer, Commercial Radio Australia

[16:10]

ACTING CHAIR: I welcome representatives of Commercial Radio Australia. Thank you for talking to us today. The committee has received your submission as submission 14. Do you wish to make any amendments or alterations to your submission?

Ms Warner: No, we do not.

ACTING CHAIR: Do you wish to make a brief opening statement before we go to questions?

Ms Warner: If you do not mind, we would like to make just a couple of comments. Commercial Radio Australia, as you know, is the peak industry body for commercial radio stations across the country. We represent about 99 per cent of commercial radio stations.

Commercial radio stations are keen to offer as much assistance as they can in their local communities, both to their listeners and to the emergency services organisations. We play a particularly important role in that nearly 80 per cent of Australians listen to commercial radio. That caused a problem for us, which we can discuss bit later if you like, particularly in Victoria during the Black Saturday bushfires when the ABC was actively promoting itself as the official emergency services broadcaster. Of course, out of the Royal Commission came the recommendation that commercial radio also be included in that group.

We have been working very proactively since that time with state governments, and we have recently written to every local government outlining what our responsibilities are under our codes and the fact that we now have memoranda of understanding which set out a whole range of processes with a number of state governments.

I will hand over to my colleagues for another minute or two and they can give you their overview from a station perspective and firsthand involvement in the recent cyclones and the bushfires.

Mr Taylor: ACE Radio Broadcasters operates 13 regional stations on the AM and FM frequencies across Victoria and southern New South Wales. We actively promote ourselves as official emergency broadcasters and offer all of the emergency departments contact via one phone number and one email address. That is manned by senior management 24 hours a day.

We were one of the instrumental parties in the introduction of the MOU in Victoria following the Black Saturday fires in 2009, where ACE was heavily involved in local coverage of the fires and experienced frustration in our communications with emergency services during that period. I must say, though, that since the MOU has been in place there has been some improvement. However, during the January 2011 floods in Victoria our stations again encountered some issues.

Although many of these situations improved through the course of the events we found there was a lack of understanding from emergency services, specifically towards the role of local commercial radio and how we play out in such a situation. On several occasions we were put in a queue; I was on the air myself for much of the Victorian floods and experienced it. During times of staff handovers or shift changes we experienced major delays in gaining access to correct emergency service representatives, often finding ourselves starting from scratch in explaining who we were and, in some instances, justifying our role.

Local council representatives and government MPs were more than happy to provide direct access to us. For example, during the floods, the Horsham mayor, Michael Ryan, provided us with his mobile phone number for direct quotes and immediate-to-air responses. We would have liked emergency service departments to have been as accessible.

During the January floods, ACE Radio Broadcasters and others initiated full outside broadcasts of local community meetings on both our AM and FM frequencies to ensure that every possible member of the community received the most current and relevant information. Addressing the local residents at one of those meetings the Horsham mayor, Michael Ryan, said, 'The ABC is doing a great job, but I think it's the local radio stations that have more current information because people are ringing saying, "This is happening in my area," so I think it's a really good idea to use ACE Radio as a real important source so that the information you have is current and accurate.' Throughout the floods, our presenters were constantly liaising with local authorities in relation to the issues that matter to the local community—traffic situations, allocations of sandbags, electricity

outages, road closures and police matters. To our listeners, these were the hot issues that mattered the most. The community response to our efforts in relaying this information has indicated the need for local broadcasters to be given absolute priority in emergency events. Commercial radio has the ability to give the most current and up-to-date local information. When time is of the essence, it is imperative that we get this information to air as soon as possible. In closing, ACE Radio Broadcasters endorses the recommendations from Commercial Radio Australia in their submission to the Senate inquiry and also shares the views of Southern Cross Austereo.

Mr Brice: Southern Cross Austereo operates 68 regional stations across all states of Australia on the AM and FM frequencies. SCA take the responsibility of emergency warning very seriously in all of our local markets and have had in place, for many years, emergency plans for each individual market, planned and executed by local management and staff. The emergency plan includes details of all emergency contacts in the market and across the greater network, plus emergency local services and contacts and after-hours numbers. This is being constantly refreshed and in some markets, for example Bundaberg, both the general manager and the local content director of SEA 93.1 CFM Bundaberg are active members of the Bundaberg local disaster management group. Copies of the emergency plans are in place in studios and staff noticeboards in all of our stations for instant access as required.

Fundamentally, when an emergency arises, our network encourages the local market to make any and all decisions to get information to air in an accurate and speedy way without any reference to cost or manpower restraints and to use the extensive resources of the network as they see fit. This year's weather disasters, which started in December, were tropical Cyclone Tasha in North Queensland, then tropical Cyclone Anthony and tropical Cyclone Zelia in January, followed by tropical Cyclone Yasi from 31 January to 3 February. These disasters were an enormous test for those plans. As an example, in the case of North Queensland cyclone activity, and in particular Townsville, Cairns and Mackay, the process for emergency services to have information updated and SCA stations was put to good and effective use. In fact, we believe that the way we have set up our regional network allows for enormous flexibility of operations in local markets. Without these network capabilities, 4TO, our Townsville station, would have been off air during the height of Yasi bearing down on Townsville in the early hours of the morning. Instead, it was kept on air using expensive network resources and staffing.

Were we to have a suggestion, it would be to further reinforce the MOUs with emergency staff on the ground in local markets so they clearly understand local commercial radio's vital role in the distribution of accurate information to local residents. We would like to clarify a system that would advise local media of changes in staff, and their contact numbers, involved in local emergency services and would allow commercial radio journalists or reporters to be part of the priority distribution of information.

Finally, we would value clearer guidelines to allow staff involved with emergency services to be given permission to pass on information and emergency information to local media without needing to kick it up the chain. This year was an extraordinary year for natural disasters, not just in Queensland but also in New South Wales and Victoria. On a positive note, the MOUs in operation in all states have had a reinforcing effect on many government agencies regarding local commercial radio's reach into these markets. Considering the huge amount of issues that senior community and emergency staff are asked to supervise during this disasters, we believe that everyone did the best job possible considering the circumstances involved.

Senator BACK: The big issue confronting the committee is to try and report with recommendations for a system as close to failsafe as possible with regard to getting the emergency messages out. One of the points that was made here this afternoon concerned Japanese technology which enables a radio that is turned off to be activated for the purpose of the sending out of emergency messages. This apparently happened with the tsunami and they are ascribing the relatively low loss of life partially to this exercise. Are you familiar with this technology at all?

Mr Brice: Certainly from my perspective I am not aware of it at all.

Senator BACK: It would get over that problem of radios being turned off, would it not?

Mr Brice: Yes, I would be fascinated to understand how they do that. If something is turned off it is pretty much turned off, but obviously it has worked for them.

Senator BACK: In fact, I think one of the gentlemen said that either he or a colleague had seen it demonstrated in an Asian telecommunications function recently. That is the challenge for radios as a reliable form. They are great because they are in people's cars and homes et cetera, but if they are off then that becomes a real challenge.

Mr Brice: In these markets—and I am talking about North Queensland for the moment—where flooding and cyclones occur on a regular basis, I think everyone is very aware of the requirement that they need to make sure

that their emergency service updates are in line. The radio is a very important part of that. I am not sure if anyone in those markets, knowing the markets as well as I do, would be surprised by anything that was bearing down on them. However, there would obviously be other circumstances that would require that.

Senator BACK: Yes, the Black Saturday scenario was a total contrast to that. There was one particular instance I recall where a fellow had lived in the community for a long period of time and was well attuned to the bush, but had absolutely no idea that the fire was anywhere near him. He got in his utility and drove to the edge of an escarpment, expecting to see it kilometres into the distance in the middle of the afternoon, but, to his horror, the flames were rushing straight up the hill to him. He just managed to turn the vehicle around, pick up his wife and whoever, and get out. He is not a person ignorant of the bush, but he reported afterwards his absolute amazement that the fire was just so close to him. Floods are probably a bit different; they move a bit more slowly.

Everybody on this committee is loud in their praise of the role that all media play in emergencies in Australia, there is no doubt about that. Given that those managing the incidents have to know that a message they put out is actually going to get out with the highest priority, can commercial radio guarantee that in the face of an emergency? I mentioned the Bledisloe Cup, perhaps I will come back to an AFL grand final between the Eagles and the Dockers—that is a long time into the future. Is it the case that commercial radio would be able to put to one side its commercial commitments to its sponsors and listening audience in the event of an emergency of that type and continually run a message that an incident controller might want out?

Ms Warner: Yes, and commercial radio stations do it all the time. If you are talking about regional areas, 80 per cent of the sponsors are local businesses anyway. So they have no problem with programming being broken into. Our codes require us to broadcast emergency services messages when required and requested, but I think you would agree that local commercial stations often go way above that. Because they are so local, they are there in the studio with the sandbags outside the door while still broadcasting. In fact, I think in Cairns and Townsville during the cyclone the ABC was off air and commercial radio was on. There has never been a question in my time in this role—and that is 10 years—of a commercial broadcaster not breaking into programming for emergency services announcements. There was back in 1999, I think, in Western Sydney when one of the FM stations did not break in to talk about bushfires, but that is why we now have a code, and that code came into play in the year 2000.

Senator BACK: Can I ask you about rural and regional areas, which is a specific concern, especially on a weekend. I am from Western Australia, so I will make this analogy. The feed may be coming from the eastern states. Can you tell me what technology is in place so that, should the eastern wheat belt around Merredin have an emergency, wherever this feed is being taken from—Sydney, Melbourne—can override—

Ms Warner: Can I tell you about the MOUs that we have. As I say, after the Victorian bushfires some years ago and after the royal commission we entered into an MOU with the Victorian government. Now we have one with Queensland, with New South Wales, we are working on one with WA and we have one with the Country Fire Service in South Australia. As part of those MOUs we have very up-to-date databases. We are required to supply at least two phone numbers for each station—not the same person—and fax numbers, and vice versa as well. Our people have to have an up-to-date emergency services contact. So we know that our people, even if they are not in the station, are contactable and will go and open up a station. As to the technology, you can probably talk about that.

Mr Brice: I can speak for stations like Merredin, Narrogin and around those areas. We broadcast into those marketplaces. We have a hub station in Bunbury which has its own satellite uplink to those marketplaces, so it is not a landline. We are not subject to losing cabling or anything of that nature. We have this emergency plan system in place. If we are contacted to broadcast anything, over weekends, at two o'clock in the morning, there are a number of contact numbers. A range of people can be contacted directly from any emergency service and we will simply open the radio station and broadcast. We can broadcast individually into each individual market because of the network technology that we have. So we can do something specific for Narrogin, Merredin or Esperance, if you like. It is not a problem. In fact, it is something we do on a regular basis.

Mr Taylor: If I could just add to that. There was an incident on Saturday night just gone at our Hamilton station in Victoria. Portland issued a notice at a quarter to seven at night saying there was a gas leak and a bad gas smell around the township of Portland and so on. I saw that emergency email come in at a quarter to seven, the system went into place and the first announcement was broadcast on our Portland FM repeater station at 6.59 pm and thereon for the rest of the night until we were told to cease. So we can break in very quickly.

Senator BACK: What was that time lapse again?

Mr Taylor: About 14 or 15 minutes.

Mr Brice: The reality is that with the technology we have the program director or content director can actually open up the studio at home on a laptop and, if necessary, even voice track on his laptop direct into the on-air program, break into satellite feed or do whatever is required.

Mr Taylor: It is the same with our network. If it were too long a distance for them to drive to the studio, they could record it on their laptop, put it in the system and be driving to the station and hear their first emergency warning announcement read off the script supplied by the SES or whoever may have sent it.

Senator BACK: This is a question somewhat out of left field and it does not relate directly to the technology of communications. We have heard today and we are aware that people in some circumstances are becoming deaf to emergency warnings. One of the problems, as was said earlier today, is that you can get the message out but a community or members within it might simply be weary of the continuing warnings of cyclones that did not take place. From your considerable experience in radio, what advice would you have to emergency service providers about getting messages out in a way that might appeal to audiences who perhaps would not be as brainwashed, disciplined or cautious as, for example, me?

Mr Taylor: With the flood experience, we found that simply reading out the announcement was not enough, that our listeners were craving to hear the incident controller or someone in power tell them what to do. Sure, we follow it up afterwards and read the warnings out and so on but, if you are able to put that person to air so that people can hear in that person's voice his genuine concern of an area needing to be evacuated, that changes everything, rather than reading out an announcement that says, 'We advise of the possible evacuation of such and such a street.'

Mr Brice: I would agree with that. To get actuality from people in authority and get them broadcasting on air is pivotal to the distribution. It draws people in. Likewise, I have to say, just the phrase 'emergency announcement' is enough to draw people in. It is a bit like saying, 'Mercedes-Benz are $100 each.' If the message is strong enough, people are drawn to it. But we like to get as many people as possible on air in the local marketplace to tell the story. Listeners want to hear people with credibility.

Senator BACK: I just have one quick final question. What recommendations would you want this committee to take forward to the Senate?

Ms Warner: Probably the recommendations out of our submission. Our first one is that commercial radio's role be highlighted in any publicity around emergencies or from emergency services—that we do not hear ever again that the ABC is the official emergency services broadcaster, when the ABC may be off air and you have even your local commercial station broadcasting and most people are listening to that.

Our other suggestion, which we have made a few times in dealing with state governments, is that there is a designated person who will always take calls from whatever media, whether it is local commercial radio or the ABC or Channel 7, and that that person—or even two people—is always available. Sometimes our members find that they will call and the person that they spoke to two hours ago is not there. They might get onto someone who does not realise that they are meant to be giving information out to 4TO or 2TO or 7LX and they think, 'I don't have to give you information.' In fact, there have been in instances where our broadcasters have been told: 'Go to the ABC website and get your information,' which is ridiculous. That has all been addressed now. We have done a lot of work with local councils. We have done a lot of work with state governments.

But I think we would say there needs to be a really clear communication protocol and one or two identified spokespeople who will always give the latest information to the media when they call, or who are willing to do a few grabs and have them on a website so that people could go to a website and take the latest grab from the emergency services commissioner, who did it one minute ago. I do not know. It is just really that we need to have a firm set of protocols, as we have to provide a range of information to emergency services.

The other thing is that we would like to actually know who is coordinating a disaster or an emergency. I think we flagged it in our submission that, in some instances, some of our broadcasters were told to play the emergency warning—and of course people really spring to action when they hear the siren—and then they were contacted a little bit later by another department saying: 'What on earth are you doing playing that warning? Don't play it.' I think sometimes it is just knowing who is the peak body for a situation. Who do you talk to in the bushfires? Is it the fire brigade and you do not pay any attention to anyone else? In a terrorism situation, is it the Federal Police or is it the state police?

Senator BACK: So it is not clear to you who the lead agency is—

Ms Warner: Sometimes.

Senator BACK: and a job should be under incident control, it should be clear to you who the lead agency is and from there should always flow—

Ms Warner: Their communications.

Senator BACK: the channel of communications from them to you. Thank you.

ACTING CHAIR: I have a couple of follow-up questions on this. When does your responsibility to warn about an emergency or a disaster phase into a news story and then become editorialising? Are there some protocols that you use?

Ms Warner: Do you mean when does it become not a warning anymore and become more like news?

ACTING CHAIR: Yes. When does it become a news story and not a warning?

Ms Warner: The protocols are that the warning must always be given. We do not have any choice or any ability to say, 'We'll just do it in the news.' We actually had a hand in developing those guidelines that were tabled by Free TV and in suggesting that there be different levels of warning so that, if someone gets a warning, they know whether they can do it in the news as an update—there could be a cyclone coming at the end of the week—or whether it has to step up a level. Everybody in the station should know their responsibilities so that, as soon as you get that warning, you know that is breaking into programming, or it is every 15 minutes. We have no choice over whether we make the announcement or not; as far as we are concerned and as far as our people are trained, they make every emergency announcement and every warning. They will also do talkback on it; they will also do a news story; they will also do updates and break to people in the field. But the warnings themselves are normally read word for word as well, as they come through on the fax, so the message is getting out there.

ACTING CHAIR: You also said you have the capacity to break in on your laptop. We have evidence that the internet becomes clogged and unusable at times during emergencies. Have you ever had that?

Mr Brice: I can speak for my network for, let us say, the last 12 months. I cannot think of any occasion when they have not had access. In Townsville we had the situation where our radio station was told to evacuate the building—it is quite a way inland—at about one o'clock in the afternoon because of fears of a tidal surge during Yasi. We moved the entire radio station to the garage of our program director, whose house was a little further inland and a little higher, and we simply took along a unit that is half the size of an A4 page and we used landline with that right through the night. It worked quite effectively. When we did go off air we had network facilities to assist us in getting our AM transmission towers back and running and working effectively through the night as well.

Mr Taylor: What becomes clogged, rather than the use of the internet, is getting on to particular sites in times of emergency. We had trouble accessing various sites such as the SES and CFA sites and found it frustrating. We were told that a warning was about to be issued and we were checking our emails, fax machines, websites and so on. Often the warnings would appear on the websites to the general public before they were given to us to broadcast. If there could be a particular private site that the media could access, rather than the same site that we are on the air are telling everyone to look at, that might be of great help to broadcasters.

ACTING CHAIR: I suppose there are some ethical dilemmas about providing information to the media and not providing it to the general public, but I suppose if the greater good is that you can get it out to a wider audience that way—

Mr Brice: It could be the same information, simply loaded up onto a password protected website.

ACTING CHAIR: So you are just saying: make sure there is access.

Mr Taylor: Yes, make sure we can access that site immediately rather than have it hanging when you are trying to get on it.

ACTING CHAIR: Do you have a commercial radio industry code of practice dealing with these issues?

Mr Brice: Yes.

Ms Warner: Yes, we do.

ACTING CHAIR: Is it similar to the television one?

Ms Warner: It would be. Ours is, as we have noted in our submission, Code 8. That is our emergency services code. That came about, as I said, after some bushfires in western Sydney and that is what requires us under our co-regulatory regime—not self-regulatory but co-regulatory; we have a regulator—to set up appropriate internal structures to allow us to keep broadcasting and to break into broadcasts. As an adjunct to that, as I say, we now have memorandums of understanding with a large number of the states and a couple in the works. That sets out protocols for both sides. The code sets out things that we have to do, but there was no responsibility, interestingly, on the other side to make information available. The MOUs actually set out some protocols for the emergency services to make information available and that, I think, has made it a lot better for our broadcasters.

ACTING CHAIR: I will cut to one last point. Mr Taylor spoke about gas pipe leaks, and for people in the vicinity they would be an emergency, I would assume. What about the Cronulla riots—would they have been an emergency?

Mr Taylor: I think so. If we were told by the police that people were to avoid a particular area we would consider that an emergency and broadcast that immediately. During the flood crisis there were a number of police messages that came directly to us. Simple messages that really only relate to local media, like, 'People who are delivering sandbags driving around in the backs of utes without seatbelts on and could be injured: you need to stop this immediately'—that type of information was considered part of the emergency broadcast to stop those people being harmed.

ACTING CHAIR: I am just wondering whether in your code of practice there are any codes that relate to the experience of the Cronulla riots, when there was a great deal of instigation from broadcasters like Alan Jones leading up to that riot. Do you have any code of practice that would militate against that type of behaviour happening again?

Ms Warner: Militate against?

ACTING CHAIR: The behaviour of Alan Jones.

Ms Warner: Our codes, of course, cover all aspects of broadcasting, including content. So if he were found to be inciting some sort of violence then a code complaint could be made and the regulator would investigate.

ACTING CHAIR: So when he invited biker gangs to go to Cronulla railway station to beat up Lebanese thugs, is that—

Ms Warner: It would be covered by the code.

ACTING CHAIR: Do you know what happened?

Ms Warner: It would be under matters unfit for broadcast.

ACTING CHAIR: So that would be unfit?

Ms Warner: I do not know that there was a complaint made about it to the regulator, actually.

ACTING CHAIR: There was not. So people have to make a complaint.

Ms Warner: Yes. We are a coregulatory—

ACTING CHAIR: You would not think it is a code that the industry should try to apply? We are here talking about emergency situations. The Cronulla riot was an emergency situation. You would not want to be taking your wife and kids down into the streets in Cronulla when that was going on, and a lot of it was instigated by one of your more prominent broadcasters.

Ms Warner: You are talking about two different issues, though, I think—emergency services broadcasting and getting emergency messages out. Obviously, where the police send a message to a radio station to avoid a certain area or whatever, that is broadcast, just as in a bad traffic accident drivers avoid that area. The other issue you are talking about is the regulation of content and of what people are saying on air, not so much emergency services. So, yes, there are codes.

ACTING CHAIR: I am just linking them both, because we are here talking about—

Ms Warner: I do not think they are linked, really.

ACTING CHAIR: You do not think they are linked?

Ms Warner: I do not think they are linked. Here we are talking about emergency services and how we get the message out and tell people. Whether it is an act of terrorism, civil unrest, a flood or a cyclone, we have processes and very strict procedures in place. The other issue that you have raised is a content issue, a regulation of content and what happens if somebody breaches a code and broadcasts what we would call material unfit for broadcast.

ACTING CHAIR: Do you know if commercial radio, and particularly 2GB, issued any warnings about what was happening in Cronulla during the riots?

Ms Warner: I do not know. I could not answer that.

ACTING CHAIR: Could you find out for us.

Ms Warner: Yes, I could ask. I am not sure that there was anything sent to any of the radio industry by the police asking them to—

ACTING CHAIR: It was not like the gas leak, where emergency services asked the industry to do something? You think it was not to that extent?

Ms Warner: In that case it would probably be more of a news story. I think that is where the information would go out to the public. As an incident was developing, not only 2GB but other radio stations and media outlets would report.

ACTING CHAIR: Thanks. I could not help myself!

Senator BILYK: In your submission you mention—and you have mentioned it again today—that during the floods there were some instances where the public was directed only to the ABC and no mention was made of commercial radio stations. Who directed people to the ABC? Who was that direction made by? Was that something the ABC was saying, or did somebody else direct it?

Ms Warner: On a couple of occasions, Anna Bligh was one of the people that said the ABC is the official emergency services broadcaster in Queensland. That was after we had our MOU with them, so that was a bit frustrating. Also, some local governments throughout Queensland would direct people on their website to the ABC. We addressed that as soon as it happened and, as I say, we have now written to every local council in the states in which we have an MOU, and they have all written back and said, 'Thanks for letting us know, because no-one had told us.

Senator BILYK: Can you tell us what states you do not have an MOU in.

Ms Warner: We do not have one in WA or in Tasmania, but we are currently negotiating one in Tasmania.

Senator BILYK: That is of particular interest to me as a Tasmanian senator. But you are negotiating one.

Ms Warner: We are negotiating because, as soon as the Victorian royal commission was over and it came out that we should be more involved, we spoke to the Victorian government and entered into the MOU. Then we thought, 'We may as well go to every other state government and make sure that everybody understands everybody's role in these emergencies,' because most people were not even aware of our emergency code.

Senator BILYK: Most commercial radio stations, you mean, or most governments?

Ms Warner: No, no—emergency services and governments.

Senator BILYK: One of your recommendations that you referred to in response to Senator Back was about having a contact list or whatever, so you would agree there needs to be an up-to-date database so people know who is who, from both sides, and who to talk to?

Ms Warner: We have that already on a state-by-state basis, where we have an MOU. Each of our stations provides two or three contact names and numbers for times of emergency and, by the same token, our stations are also informed of who their local emergency services contact is. That is updated every 12 months. In fact Victoria has just sent us another note asking if our stations would add a process, and we went to our members and they said yes, so we have added another element of keeping audio records of emergency services announcements.

Senator BILYK: I am not speaking about the announcements; I am speaking about who you get to talk to and who gets to talk to your database so that you know what is happening and you can report in real time—they can give you information in real time.

Ms Warner: It is covered under our MOU but I guess it is fair to say that in practice, in some parts of the state, with the best will in the world our broadcasters are still finding they are not getting the information as quickly as they could.

Senator BILYK: Because there is a breakdown from the other end or—

Mr Brice: I think it is an education process. If you had asked that question three years ago we would have said it was a bit of a nightmare. We have learnt a lot over the years, and we have learnt that it is about forcing open the lines of communication. The great thing about commercial radio in regional areas is that it is local. A lot of our radio station staff are actually involved with community service groups. It is just as likely the local manager is going to know the local mayor, and so it is about reinforcing on that local level. We have done a big push pretty much right the way through the industry to do that, to reinforce that local side of things. Things have markedly improved.

Mr Taylor: We do not want to find ourselves in a queue waiting 30 minutes to talk to an incident controller about something that is happening locally that they need to get the message across for while we are waiting for them to record a 30-second grab for the Channel 9 news at six o'clock that night. That is what we were finding—we were finding we were behind all of the capital city media grabbing a news story when we wanted to put someone to air to tell people where to pick up sandbags or to stop going to that place because there is traffic congestion or whatever. Someone asked before what are the things that the committee can get across. I think it is to give the local media priority in these small country towns or wherever the small events are occurring—that the emergency services give the media on the ground the priority as opposed to going to air on 2GB in Sydney.

Senator BILYK: Does commercial radio do announcements in languages other than English?

Ms Warner: No.

Senator HUMPHRIES: Let us be clear about what exactly is covered in these MOUs that is not in the codes of practice. You mentioned a requirement to exchange phone numbers of contact people. There must be more to it than that. What else is specified in the MOUs?

Ms Warner: Let me refer to the Victorian MOU, because that is the first one we did and that is the one we based all the others on. It was a long time in gestation. It is basically an agreement between the two parties—the radio industry and the emergency services—to have a centralised database in that state of people who are contactable, to provide after-hours contacts so that if a studio is closed someone can always be contacted. From our perspective it also sets out that they have a responsibility to let us know. That is the positive for us from these MOUs. Our codes of practice require us to do certain things but could not require emergency services.

There is a whole lot of indemnity in there as well. It is an agreement—they are indemnified if they do not give us the information on time and we are indemnified if we do not get the information or do not get it out. It is also quite a lengthy legal document, but the bottom line is that we agree to tell each other who we are.

In Victoria we have a yearly meeting of the media with emergency services to talk about protocols for the coming emergency services season. There is also the opportunity to have a meeting of all the media with emergency services after an event so that they can go over what went wrong or what did or did not work. It just sets out very basic processes. You would wonder why we would have needed that, but the fact is we did. Now we have got them, as both Mark and Rod have said, it oils the wheels a little bit from the emergency services side, because they know there is an MOU, they know they can now provide that information and they know who to talk to.

Senator HUMPHRIES: You say in your recommendations that one thing you want is for emergency organisations and stakeholders to appoint specific spokespersons who are available 24 hours a day during emergencies to provide information. That is basically covered in the MOUs—

Ms Warner: It is but, in practice, it sometimes does not work. As we have said, you will ring and a different person will be on, who does not know about the commercial radio MOU, so they will not give out the information. It is probably about training, but it also would be good to have one or two people to call in an emergency rather than just calling a number and hoping you get someone who will give you the information.

Senator HUMPHRIES: That could really be covered by refinement of the MOUs rather than by setting out new requirements in the codes of practice?

Ms Warner: We think the MOUs are working pretty well. We are pretty pleased with them. We have had to be proactive and we are still working on WA and Tasmania, but we think we will get there. Victoria has been the most engaged. It had the royal commission and had a lot of criticism made of its communications processes. The MOUs are very helpful to us and it is about educating our local radio station personnel so they know, yes, we have a code and 'Here are a whole lot of processes that you now need to follow every year.' When you get a call from CRA, saying, 'Update your database' or a call from Victorian emergency services, you have to do it.

Senator HUMPHRIES: Are those documents public documents?

Ms Warner: They are on the emergency services' websites.

Senator HUMPHRIES: The inclusion of a local radio station journalist within the local command centre is, I think, a sensible idea. Presumably, though, you would also need to include a TV journalist and perhaps a print journalist?

Ms Warner: Yes.

Senator HUMPHRIES: That could be negotiated, presumably?

Ms Warner: We are looking at an ideal world.

Senator McKENZIE: At Horsham I did go down to the radio station right on the river there, just after the sandbagging. They had nearly been inundated but they survived. They did a great job.

Mr Taylor: I was sitting in it at the time.

Senator McKENZIE: We heard today from emergency services that they would like a little more continuity between their emergency warning systems—sending out an SMS text, for instance, 'tune into blah, blah, blah now for your emergency information,' people tuning in and there being some delay et cetera. Is that the sort of thing that is covered in the processes of the MOUs? Is that sort of scenario occurring and being fixed? When the local

commercial radio station knows that emergency services are sending out their warning system by text, they say, 'We need you to go straight to this.' Is that continuity happening?

Ms Warner: It should be happening; that is all I can say. The protocols are in place and, as soon as they receive a warning, they are meant to do that. Both Mark and Rod were saying they would like to know if that is not happening.

Mr Brice: Yes.

Senator McKENZIE: So there is a protocol out there and if it is not happening, it is a local issue?

Ms Warner: This station needs to know.

Senator McKENZIE: Just to confirm: in terms of relay programming, where you are playing a program that has already been recorded, technology actually exists for you to break in?

Mr Brice: Absolutely.

Senator McKENZIE: I know this is outside your field of expertise, but I am just asking you. In television, for instance, where they are on recorded programming, would it be possible for them to break in in a similar kind of way? Would the technological solution be there is what I am talking about, not whether they can do it?

Mr Brice: It is not within our expertise but I would suggest that, because the transmission sites are in one location, you will certainly see pull-throughs and things like that in regional markets on a regular basis.

Senator McKENZIE: Thank you, that is the answer I wanted. In your submission, you talked about your local listeners calling in and saying, 'Such and such a bridge has flooded, do not go down that road, it does not exist anymore.' What sort of verification processes do you go through? Today we heard from other broadcasters, not commercial ones, that they go through a verification process when they are engaging with their local callers calling with very specific information around emergency scenarios. Do you just put it to air as information? I did not get a sense from your submission about that.

Mr Taylor: We avoid those types of calls in bushfire situations. We will only talk to the relevant authorities. But in a flood situation—and certainly the Victorian floods where things moved much slower—we would say to a caller that called in to say such and such a bridge was closed, 'Oh, that is interesting. We will check that with the local authorities' and confirm that before putting that caller to air. Then we would acknowledge the caller and we would say, 'Mary phoned in from Stawell to say that the such and such a bridge has closed and we have confirmed this with the Stawell police.'

Senator McKENZIE: Do we have a copy of your code of practice?

Ms Warner: We can send that to you.

Senator McKENZIE: That would be fantastic, thanks.

ACTING CHAIR: Thank you for your helpful information today and keep up the good work.

GOONAN, Mr Anthony, Director, Network and Commercial Planning, Telstra

PARKIN, Mr John, Director, Customer Satisfaction and Experience, Telstra

SNASHALL, Mr Jamie, Senior Adviser, Government Relations, Telstra

[16.57]

ACTING CHAIR: I welcome representatives of Telstra. The committee has received your submission as submission 31. It is quite a detailed submission. Do you wish to make any amendments or alterations to your submission?

Mr Snashall: No.

ACTING CHAIR: Do you wish to make a brief opening statement before we go to questions?

Mr Snashall: Yes, thank you very much. We at Telstra thank you for the opportunity to appear before you this afternoon. Of course, our submission deals in detail with many of the relevant points that have already been raised and that I imagine you will seek to question us on, so I will not go back over that in any great detail. Mr John Parkin on my right is the expert on what happened in Queensland over the summer of floods and Cyclone Yasi and Mr Anthony Goonan is our networks and spectrum expert. I am hoping that all of your questions will be on those issues and they will take them!

Firstly, Telstra believes the performance of our networks, emergency procedures and staff efforts across the country in responding to the many disasters of the summer just gone were very effective . We need to keep in mind the magnitude of what the country experienced in the summer of 2010-11. An area greater than France and Germany combined was impacted by the floods in Queensland and obviously many other states were also severely hit with natural disasters which meant that our human resources were stretched and it also presented enormous logistical and equipment challenges for us. I draw the attention of the committee to the revised table on page 7 of our submission to give you a useful historical comparison of the size of these disasters versus our responses to some selected earlier disasters. Although our final costs are not yet available for response to and recovery from these disasters, it is certainly in the tens of millions of dollars.

Secondly, can I say that natural disasters and emergencies are inevitable. The ferocity of these types of events means that the resulting impacts on a network are in many cases unavoidable and they apply regardless of whether such networks have been established for commercial or other community-based purposes. The weather gods do not discriminate when they come through an area on whether it is our network or indeed the network of anybody else. We would also say that such impacts can be reduced, however, if these networks are planned and operated with the inevitability of these disasters in mind.

It is certainly the case that our networks and operations suffered damage as a result of the various disasters during the summer, but our fixed, mobile and managed radio service networks and associated disaster recovery operations and processes operated very effectively. Our staff worked quickly and effectively and, in many cases, around the clock to restore services efficiently once it was safe for our people to access those impacted areas. In many cases, the existence of multiple networks in affected areas meant that alternative forms of communication were still able to be maintained. Redundancy in the network and prompt attention to the recovery of base stations meant that customer impacts were minimised wherever possible.

Our standard disaster response processes included a range of measures to help customers stay in touch with family and friends when normal services had been affected. We provided free handsets with SIM cards for use by evacuees, temporary internet kiosks and laptop access in evacuation centres, and free phone cards, and we switched payphones to provide free local and STD calls in affected areas. We also had what we call COWs, SatCOWs and MEOWs, of which there is a little more detail in our submission. This is not a diversification—

ACTING CHAIR: You should be very careful what you say when you are in the Senate, or the parliament—anywhere!

Mr Snashall: Right, a very good point—thank you, Senator Cameron, for that reminder! We used our COWs, SatCOWs and the other technology—mobile exchange on wheels, to give its full title. This is not a diversification of our customer base into farmyard and domestic animals but some acronyms for some of the technology solutions we have developed over the years to restore services quickly to disaster hit communities. The cell on wheels, or COW, is a temporary mobile base station that provides temporary coverage when a mobile site is lost, or it can provide a temporary expansion of mobile coverage. A SatCOW is very portable and, I understand, can be transported in a four-wheel drive, light aircraft or helicopter and be up and running within 90 minutes. The

SatCOW can operate without transmission or power while the COW and the mobile exchange on wheels can operate using generators, batteries and mains power.

Turning to emergency service organisations, we work very closely with ESOs, regulators and other government agencies before, during and after these disaster events. We were very pleased to receive a commendation by the Chairman of the Australian Communications and Media Authority for the assistance that we provided to them during the disasters. I understand that Queensland police also put their thanks on the record, and the efforts that we undertook were also recognised by the industry recently at the ACOMM Awards.

We believe that good working relationships exist between telecommunications providers and the emergency service organisations. We work closely with the ESOs in all phases of the emergency management life cycle of planning, preparedness, response and recovery. Using these relationships, Telstra has been able to facilitate a number of innovative solutions to assist ESOs out in the field. Our global operations centre, or GOC, which operates from Clayton in Melbourne, is a single national point of backup contact on a 24/7 basis to handle and coordinate crisis response and recovery. This is a very good example of the cooperative relationship that we have with ESOs.

I should turn to our management of the emergency alert systems. We believe that our management of these systems proves very efficient in enabling individuals to seek assistance from ESOs and for ESOs to issue a range of warning messages. We also believe that this assisted other jurisdictions in the effective management of the overall impact of the disasters on communities. We believe that some consideration needs to be given to strategies to better preserve the supply of power in the event of disasters. The ferocity of these disasters caused power blackouts that impacted on the community at large, and this includes the ability to deliver services over our networks that need power to operate. Whilst it is true that we use battery back-up and generators to ensure continuity of service for as long as we can, obviously batteries and generators have a limited life and cannot ensure longer term availability of telecommunications services in areas where electric power cannot be restored quickly.

Finally, we consider that new technologies such as mobile broadband networks, cloud computing and social media provide significant new opportunities to enhance the activities of ESOs in such situations. These opportunities include the potential for increased productivity and capacity, new applications, greater security, increased availability, reduced costs and increased interoperability between organisations. We believe that we are highly responsive to the needs of the communities where we work and operate, and that the reliability of our networks and of our dedicated staff in going beyond the call of duty to restore services in times of emergency are second to none. We will continue to engage with ESOs to find cost-effective mobile broadband solutions. That concludes the statement.

ACTING CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Snashall. We will go to questions.

Senator HUMPHRIES: I read with interest the comments you make in your submission about emergency alerts and the statement:

In Telstra's submission the Emergency Alert System operated effectively over the 2010/2011 summer season.

I am little surprised that you are not aware of a large number of comments about the gaps in the emergency alert system. You would have seen, I am sure, the comments made to a number of the inquiries in Victoria and Queensland about gaps. You might have read the comments in some of the submissions received by this committee. Given that you operate the emergency alert system as a successful tenderer to the federal government, I suppose you have a barrow to push to make sure it is supported. But would you not acknowledge that there are some criticisms in a number of quarters about the gaps in the emergency alert system?

Mr Goonan: Would you be able to describe the gaps to which you are referring?

Senator HUMPHRIES: The gaps, for example, are caused by the fact that the location that rings is the registered address of the phone rather than where the phone actually is and the fact that the phone does not work when switched to silent or turned off and that where there is a power blackout and the phone runs out of power you do not have any power to operate the phone, so the phone dies. There has been a number of criticisms. Are you not aware of the criticisms made in the royal commissions and such?

Mr Goonan: I just wanted to address your question directly. With respect to those particular shortfalls, they are something that Telstra is aware of but what we have built is a system to the specification that was required of us. Some of those shortfalls, in relation to mobile phones and batteries going dead et cetera, are really a limitation of the technology. It is impossible to deliver a message if the device is unable to receive that message. The technology does not have a capability to acknowledge receipt.

Senator HUMPHRIES: What you are really saying in the submission is that the emergency alert system operated effectively within the design limitations.

Mr Goonan: Absolutely.

Senator HUMPHRIES: You are not suggesting that it is an effective system in all cases for reaching—

Mr Goonan: Both the criticisms that you have raised are valid.

Senator HUMPHRIES: You say it is 'one tool that the emergency services management agencies may use to warn the community in the event of an emergency or likely emergency'. That is also a little bit of an exaggeration, isn't it? We have been hearing about the capacity for the broadcasting on radio and television of emergency warnings and there is the internet for those still accessing the internet and so forth.

Mr Goonan: I think the context in which that statement was made was that it was a new innovation, an extra tool in the toolkit for emergency services.

Senator HUMPHRIES: But it is not the only tool that emergency management agencies can use to warn a community, is it?

Mr Goonan: No.

Senator HUMPHRIES: When an alert is sent out under Emergency Alert to a particular area, is there a cost associated with that?

Mr Goonan: With the process for identifying where to send a short message service, we are given a specification from the emergency services authority, we then determine the customers that are in that particular area and we send out the short message service. There is a cost associated with sending a message, as is the case with sending out normal messages. So, yes, Senator.

Senator HUMPHRIES: So who bears that cost?

Mr Goonan: I cannot tell you that directly. My understanding is that the emergency service authorities have a contract and bear the cost.

Senator HUMPHRIES: Effectively it is a service that you are providing at cost to the organisations that use it?

Mr Goonan: It is a service that is offered. I am not aware of the commercial arrangements for it so I cannot comment as to whether it is at cost or otherwise.

Senator HUMPHRIES: What I mean is that they pay for it; they do not get it for free.

Mr Goonan: That is correct.

Mr Snashall: Senator Humphries, we can get you some more detail on that if you like.

Senator HUMPHRIES: Yes. As an organisation you have community service obligations, don't you?

Mr Snashall: The USO?

Senator HUMPHRIES: Yes, the USO.

Mr Snashall: Yes.

Senator HUMPHRIES: But this is not one of them—that is, the service you provide for Emergency Alert has to be paid for by the emergency organisations accessing it?

Mr Snashall: That is correct.

Senator HUMPHRIES: Can I turn to the spectrum issue. You have criticised the suggestion that emergency services should have the 700-megahertz band reserved for them and you have said they should be in the 800 band. You said:

… in the absence of a Government business plan and commitment to fund the roll out of a standalone network, there is a high risk that the spectrum would remain largely unused.

Are you saying there that the only way that the 700 band will work is if there is a considerable investment made to build the technology that would allow emergency services to use that technology and that without that it is redundant?

Mr Goonan: To operate any type of mobile service you need to utilise spectrum and to utilise that spectrum throughout the area where you are providing that service. If spectrum was set aside it is in danger of, if you like, lying fallow where it is simply not used, or underutilised where you have a relatively small number of customers or users utilising that spectrum.

Senator HUMPHRIES: So what is the difference between the 700 and the 800 spectrum? You are saying that if they use the 800 spectrum they will be sharing with commercial users and so they will access via commercial users of the spectrum?

Mr Goonan: In planning set down by the International Telecommunications Union and also by the Australian Communications and Media Authority, for some years the 700-megahertz so-called digital dividend spectrum has been set aside for public mobile telephone services. Also, what has been set aside at the bottom end of the 800-megahertz spectrum—I think from 806 to 824 megahertz—is a piece of spectrum that is known as PPDR or public protection and disaster relief, and that piece of spectrum has been harmonised across the South-East Asia region. By harmonised I mean the countries that are in that region of South-East Asia, New Zealand et cetera, all have that piece of spectrum earmarked, if you like, for a common emergency service capability so that devices, handsets et cetera would work equally in Australia as they would in New Zealand and South-East Asia. So one of Telstra's submissions has been that that spectrum is better suited for the utility that the emergency service organisations are looking for, as opposed to utilising the valuable and scarce spectrum at 700 megahertz.

Senator BILYK: Can I just ask for a clarification there. We heard earlier that the 700-megahertz band can more easily be adapted to the Asia-Pacific digital dividend spectrum plan. Are you saying that is not correct?

Mr Goonan: In fact, I think it is quite the opposite. The 700-megahertz spectrum plan is for Australia. There are lots of different 700-megahertz bands across the world. The 700-megahertz band plan in North America is different to the 700-megahertz band plan here in Australia. So there are in fact not synergies between those. Where there are synergies is at that lower end of the 800-megahertz spectrum that I mentioned before.

Senator BILYK: So where do you get that information from? Previously we heard that industry suppliers are already developing chipsets.

Mr Goonan: Under the standard development for fourth-generation long-term evolution technology—4G technology—the 700-megahertz band is one such band that is set aside for that technology but the device manufacturers have to produce chipsets that will operate for the US, Australia, Europe and different areas of the world. They are all a little bit different. The Australian band plan, as I said is different from other countries. So whilst there is a broad community of interest in 700 megahertz there are bespoke developments to be made in each country and that has not yet occurred for Australia because that spectrum is not yet available in Australia.

Senator HUMPHRIES: There are a range of issues that particularly the emergency service organisations, at least some of them, and the Police Federation of Australia have raised in their submission and their live evidence today which I would ask you to examine and respond to. There are a number of issues which they have raised. For example, they say that the 800 spectrum is narrowband whereas 700 is broadband. They say that the umbrella organisation representing carriers in Asia is now recommending to the governments that the data be carried on the 700 band not the 800 band. They say that the Radiocommunications Act has a requirement in it for adequate provision of spectrum for law-enforcement and that the 800 spectrum does not satisfy that et cetera. Rather than go through, in the short time available to us now, all of those issues because they are very technical I would appreciate it if you could take on notice the question of responding to the issues that they have raised. There is also the question of what the difference between the 700 spectrum in the US is and the 700 spectrum in Australia. I do not understand that and I would appreciate a technical description.

Mr Goonan: We will certainly take that on notice. With respect to the comment about narrowband versus wideband I do not understand that comment from the Police Federation. Essentially there is 18 megahertz of spectrum which is set aside at 806 to 824 megahertz. That 18 megahertz of spectrum is more than enough to support the broadband services that we operate today and intend to operate into the future. By way of example 10 megahertz bandwidth today supports the fourth-generation technology that Telstra is introducing. So the PPDR spectrum at 800 megahertz can more than adequately support 4G technology.

Senator McKENZIE: In your submission you talk about labour issues in telecommunications—I think it is dot point 82. I would like to know what you would recommend in regard to the development of skills in your area.

Mr Parkin: In the current workforces that we are using we are continuing to develop new skills anyway. We run a series of different trainee programs across many technical spectrums of work. That is something that as an organisation we take responsibility for in terms of developing future skills and certainly where we have examples of new technology we look to bring trainees on. We do a number of government schemes across the country and that is an active part of our business today.

Senator McKENZIE: So it is not an issue?

Mr Parkin: It is an issue here in the context of the massive build of NBN. I think that is the reference here and what that would do in terms of drawing on not only internal workforces but also subcontracted workforces as well.

Senator McKENZIE: Similar to South Gippsland and carpenters. We heard today about the ability of carriers such as yourself to be able to locate mobiles roughly in a certain location irrespective of whether the find me I am here button on smartphones is turned on or not. Are you able to explain that this technology or how that is possible?

Mr Goonan: It is fair to say that location technology is evolving. When the emergency alert capability was first built the resolution to which we could identify where a mobile customer was was quite limited—down to what we call a location area, which, for example, in the state of Victoria there was something like 13; so it was quite a large area. There have been advances to reduce that down to much greater resolution—down to the cell level. I think what you might be referring to is the next advance, where we are to use the actual location to trigger certain actions in terms of understanding where customers might be to send them a particular message. That is not built into the current emergency alert; that capability is currently either at tender or about to go to tender for operators such as Telstra or other bodies to bid for.

Senator McKENZIE: In Telstra's expert opinion, what will the effect of the NBN be on emergency communication networks?

Mr Parkin: It is difficult to comment. Why would it be any different? It is a very sophisticated network. I could not comment beyond that point. One point to note is it is a passive network and, as we have found in disaster recovery in Queensland, particularly through the floods, the dependency on power is a very significant issue. The FTTP network is passive, so it requires effectively power from the switch and power at the customer's end to make that work. That is probably an important distinction.

Senator BILYK: Is it correct that 88 per cent of the 800, 900 bands are already occupied by Telstra, Optus and Vodafone?

Mr Goonan: I would need to take that precise figure on notice and respond to you.

Senator BILYK: We have had evidence earlier today that that is the case. If you could take that on notice, that would be good. If it is so, following on from that, that leaves 12 per cent, which is not 20 per cent left. So wouldn't it take a long time to clear? We heard evidence today that it would take decades to clear. You can take all these questions on notice, if you like, and get back to us.

We were also provided with evidence that not only would it take a long time to clear but the same 800 band is being held at for four or more different interests at the same time. If you could get back to us on that, please.

Mr Goonan: I think they are all part of the police federation's paper, which you have asked for a direct response on. We will cover those issues at that time.

Senator BILYK: Thank you.

Senator BACK: Can I ask you in general terms, what is the sort of rate of decline of landlines? Do you have a graph that indicates those households particularly that are going away from landlines or not replacing them? The second part of my question is: what impact, if any, is that likely to have on your delivery of services in this sector?

Mr Snashall: Senator Back, for clarification, you are asking year on year, in effect, what is the decline?

Senator BACK: Yes. Is it declining and at what rate, where do you think it will bottom out and, particularly in terms of delivery of messages in the emergency service area, where do you predict and what advice would you be getting to this committee on that aspect?

Mr Snashall: I think we would need to take that on notice.

Mr Goonan: As a generality, Telstra sees the fixed and mobile networks as being complementary. So while seeing a decline—and we can get to the details of that—we do see continuing operation of such networks and we continue to operate our fixed line network to a set of service standards et cetera.

Senator BACK: I hope you did not take it that I was casting aspersions on your delivery of service. I am more taking it from the perspective of the end user in relation to what we have previously regarded as being a service but increasingly particularly younger people are simply not automatically placing a landline in their homes. If you could take that on notice, I would appreciate it. I come to the Emergency Alert system, which is the system of sending out messages to mobile telephones. What happens in the event of someone not having a mobile phone that is on the Telstra network—if they use Optus, Vodafone or whatever?

Mr Goonan: The Emergency Alert message is entered on the system that Telstra provides to the emergency services, but then that message is delivered to the customer regardless of which network they are on. There are agreements with the other carriers as well as with Telstra to deliver that message.

Senator BACK: In responding to a question from Senator McKenzie, you said triangulation to find out where someone is uses emerging technology. The other point when we were discussing these matters three or four years ago, and I was associated with what was the Fire and Emergency Services Authority of Western Australia's early attempt, is that needless to say it is great to get a message to those in the area of a typical bushfire somewhere, but from dormitory areas the most significant number of people are either in their workplaces or at the beach—in other words, well away from the location. What service do you have? Can you automatically alert those people or do they have to sign up and voluntarily provide a mobile number so that you can alert them when they are not in the vicinity of their home, their mother's home or whatever?

Mr Goonan: My understanding is that it is an opt-out system, so all mobiles are included unless the customer chooses not to be included in that service.

Senator BACK: So that I am clear on this, if I reside in the Dandenongs and I am in my office in Collins Street when my house is at risk I have to have registered that phone from my residence in the Dandenongs. Is that right?

Mr Goonan: My understanding is that the message is delivered on the basis of the service address that is recorded for that account.

Senator BACK: So if I have a phone because I am part of the Shell organisation and the phone is registered to Shell in Spring Street I will not get the message?

Mr Goonan: That is correct, but the system that we have introduced for mobiles is to take that into account. If you remember, I talked about that location area, so we do track where customers have moved around the network and will deliver to the area of interest if they have been in that area within the last hour, I think.

Senator McKENZIE: Do you get anyone's permission to track people?

Mr Goonan: Track is probably not the best word to use. The network keeps information of the cell or cluster of cells, the location area of where our customers are, as I mentioned before, so that we can deliver the phone calls. The system needs to know where to deliver to and we are using that piece of information.

Senator McKENZIE: You are using that information; it is not another inbuilt—

Mr Goonan: No.

Senator BACK: I suppose it is called mobile emergency on workplace. My only other observation is that it is a never-ending battle and you are right at the forefront of it, in the sense that the more that is delivered and the more that is offered, the more that is demanded—there is never a line in the sand. If you think back only four or five years, the concept of being able to send a message to everybody's mobile phone in an area to say a child has been lost or there is a chemical spill or whatever was inconceivable. Yet we are almost there now, with some areas that need to be improved. Where is the endgame, do you think? Will we ever get to the endgame? Is it going to be some device? Most kids seem to have a mobile phone stuck to their ear these days, I admit, but aren't we always going to be chasing our tail in getting timely, relevant information upon which people are likely to act?

Mr Parkin: The end game is bound by our imagination, isn't it, in terms of where we could take it? It is about what we do not know today that we will know in the future. It is very, very difficult to predict. But, as you can see, advances in that technology are incredible. Where we are likely to be in five or 10 years time is very difficult to predict.

Senator BACK: Given the networks that particularly young people have, is it a possibility—using the hub analogy—that rather than be trying to get to every person in an emergency situation we will almost get to a bacterial multiplication factor in the sense that you hope to get to 40, 50 or 60 per cent with some message in there that says, 'Pass this on,' and a reliance in fact—

Mr Parkin: A comment I would make, particularly in terms of managing the disaster up there, is that advising the community was on many levels. It was not just on the emergency alert. It was through the radio. We have heard that previously. It was through print media as well and social media such as Twitter. It came across on many levels. From the experience this year, that would still be the most recommended method so that we have every opportunity to capture every member of the community.

ACTING CHAIR: We are over time, sorry. But you did say you would come back to us in relation to the commercial arrangement with the emergency service operators. Could you also come back to us and tell us not just what the arrangement is but how you can minimise the cost to emergency service operators, because the

argument that they are putting to us is that they do not want to be beholden to a commercial operator who will charge a premium for emergency service operations. If you could come back to us on that one that would be helpful.

Mr Snashall: We are very happy to. We were familiar with what the Police Federation had lodged in their submission and we are very happy to come back to you with a series of responses to those points.

ACTING CHAIR: Thanks for your help today. We could easily have you here for another hour, but we appreciate the help you have given us. On behalf of everyone on the committee, I thank Telstra for the work you did during the emergencies. That concludes today's proceedings. I thank all witnesses for their informative presentations and also Hansard, Broadcasting and the secretariat. Questions on notice will be returned by 29 August.

Committee adjourned at 17:33