



ATTORNEY-GENERAL
THE HON ROBERT McCLELLAND MP

MINISTER FOR BROADBAND, COMMUNICATIONS AND THE
DIGITAL ECONOMY
SENATOR THE HON STEPHEN CONROY

NEWS RELEASE

23 February 2009

RUDD GOVERNMENT IMPLEMENTS COAG AGREEMENT ON TELEPHONE-BASED EMERGENCY WARNING SYSTEMS

The Rudd Government will today introduce into Parliament amendments to the *Telecommunications Act 1997* to enable access to the Integrated Public Number Database (IPND) for telephone-based emergency warning systems established by the States and Territories.

Access to the IPND will be provided through a new secure database which provides real-time access to up-to-date telephone numbers while protecting the identity of individuals. The Government will provide \$11.3 million for this purpose. A request for tender to build the database will be issued shortly.

Telephone-based emergency warning systems have been the subject of discussions between the Commonwealth, States and Territories since 2004. Until 2008, no agreement was reached.

In 2008, the Rudd Government placed the issue on the COAG agenda. COAG agreed it was a priority and commissioned the work necessary to reach agreement by the end of 2008. This work was completed, and agreement was achieved in November 2008.

This agreement was necessary to address important concerns such as ensuring telephone-based emergency warning systems do not overload and disable the telecommunications network (including access to the 000 emergency hotline) and the security of individuals' personal information.

In accordance with the agreement, the Government immediately commenced drafting legislation to authorise access to the IPND. The necessary legislation and database the Government is putting in place will enable the States and Territories to access the data needed to develop their own warning systems as soon as possible.

The historical advice to the Commonwealth has been that any plan to allow the States and Territories access to the IPND as part of any emergency warning system would be

Senate Legal & Constitutional Affairs Committee
Additional Estimates 2008-2009
23-24 February 2009

Tabled Document No 5

By: Mr Roger Wilkins, AO, Secretary
A-G's Dept
Date: 23 FEBRUARY 2009

best secured by a legislative amendment. Nevertheless, in light of the bushfire emergency in Victoria the Government has also sought advice from the Solicitor-General on an interim measure to allow access.

Based on this advice, the Government will today also make a regulation under the *Telecommunications Act 1997* enabling interim access to the IPND.

This will enable immediate access to the IPND by individual States and Territories who wish to implement a more limited system as soon as possible. It should be emphasized that this is not a long-term solution and not a substitute for amendments to the *Telecommunications Act 1997* and the planned future access arrangements for the IPND.

Under the COAG agreement, States and Territories retain autonomy about the warning systems they choose to implement.

The Commonwealth has today written to the States and Territories advising that if they are able to agree to a national system at the next possible COAG meeting the Commonwealth will make a further financial contribution to establish such a system, to be owned and operated by the States and Territories.

Whether or not a national system is established, there remain technological challenges to overcome to enable any system to communicate with all telephones in a threatened area. Advice to the Government is that current technology is limited to communicating with fixed landlines, and mobile telephones on the basis of billing address only (rather than the location of the handset). This can mean individuals in a threatened area do not receive a warning on their phones, and individuals outside a threatened area receive irrelevant warnings.

To help address this gap, at the next COAG meeting the Commonwealth will offer the States and Territories financial assistance for them to conduct collaborative research on the viability of a location-based emergency warning system.

It should also be remembered that telephone-based emergency warning systems are only a supplement to, and not a replacement for, the range of measures currently used to warn the public of emergencies, such as television and radio, public address systems, doorknocking, sirens, signage and the internet.

The steps announced by the Rudd Government today will help make telephone-based emergency warning systems one part of Australia's disaster response capability.

Media Contact:	Adam Sims (McClelland)	0419 480 224
	Tim Marshall (Conroy)	0408 258 457