SENATE STANDING COMMITTEE ON LEGAL AND CONSTITUTIONAL AFFAIRS
ATTORNEY-GENERAL'S DEPARTMENT

Program 1.2

Question No. 66

Senator Humphries asked the following question at the hearing on 22 February 2011:

1. How much have we invested in the SMS News Alert SMS phone technology, both to date and for future roll-out of the location-specific warning system?
2. How dependent is the Telstra NEWS Alert system on intact power supply and telephone infrastructure? In light of the large scale disasters we have seen in the region, with flood, fire and cyclone in Australia and earthquake in New Zealand, how reliable is the existing system when power infrastructure fails?
3. Looking at the IT disasters that have recently befallen NAB and Virgin Blue – how dependent is the current national warning system on IT resources and what guarantees can be offered that accidental faults or deliberate attack won't disable the system, the same way that NAB and Virgin Blue were almost completely shut down?
4. I understand that YellowBird won this year's Community Resilience Award sponsored by the Insurance Council of Australia—have any steps have been taken to investigate or trial YellowBird? Have you any idea of the cost of this technology?
5. I understand that YellowBird has been shown to emergency service organisations in WA, SA, NSW and the ACT(with strong support) and that there is extensive support for YellowBird from organisations such as ABC Radio, Vision Australia, Red Cross, the Australasian Fire and Emergency Services Council (AFAC), the Bushfire CRC. Have there been any steps taken to investigate the use of this technology for emergency situations in Australia?
6. Given the extensive Federal Government investment in SMS News Alert, will AGD be making a submission to the QLD Floods Inquiry?

The answer to the honourable Senator's question is as follows:

1. How much have we invested in the SMS News Alert SMS phone technology, both to date and for future roll-out of the location-specific warning system?

In 2009, the Australian Government committed $26.3 million to assist States and Territories develop a national telephone-based emergency warning capability. This included:

- $15 million for the establishment of the national telephone-based emergency warning system, *Emergency Alert*, which sends voice messages to fixed lines and text messages to mobile telephones based on the customer's registered service address. Victoria on behalf of the participating States and Territories has the contract with Telstra. The participating States and Territories have responsibility for ongoing operational and usage costs

- A contribution of $0.65 million to States and Territories to develop public education material on the use of *Emergency Alert*

- $1.35 million for the conduct of feasibility research and trials regarding the development of a capability enabling the delivery of warnings to mobile telephones based on the handset's location at the time of an emergency

- $6.9 million for the operation of the Location-Based Number Store (LBNS). The LBNS is the central data source of geo-coded telephone number and address information on which *Emergency Alert*, and Western Australia's *StateAlert*, relies, and

- $2.4 million (to 2012-13) for LBNS design, procurement and legal costs, as well as ongoing contract management and associated Departmental costs.

In September 2010, the Commonwealth also committed to meeting the establishment costs of the location-based capability, with the States and Territories responsible for the ongoing operational and usage costs.

The Commonwealth has made a deliberate decision not to announce the amount it has committed for the establishment of the location-based capability, so as not to jeopardise the current negotiations with the three national telecommunications carriers. Once the negotiations are completed, and to the Council of Australian Governments' satisfaction, the quantum of funding provided can be announced.

2. How dependent is the Telstra NEWS Alert system on intact power supply and telephone infrastructure? In light of the large scale disasters we have seen in the region, with flood, fire and cyclone in Australia and earthquake in New Zealand, how reliable is the existing system when power infrastructure fails?

Emergency Alert warnings that are sent to mobile telephones and fixed lines (not cordless) are not directly reliant on an intact power supply in the area identified to receive an emergency warning. However, warnings sent to both mobile telephones and landlines are reliant on telephone infrastructure. We are aware that the telecommunications carriers have some provision for back up power supply as part of their business continuity management plans.

Public education material, including the information provided on the *Emergency Alert* website (www.emergencyalert.gov.au) emphasises that it is critical that no single mode of warning or communication is solely relied upon in times of emergency. This applies both to the emergency authorities responsible for issuing the warnings, and to the public which may receive them. That is why all Australian governments are supportive of a multi-modal approach to warning communities. Using as many communications mechanisms as possible increases the chances that people will be able to receive and comprehend a warning and, in turn, be in a better position to protect against loss of life and property.

3. Looking at the IT disasters that have recently befallen NAB and Virgin Blue – how dependent is the current national warning system on IT resources and what guarantees can be offered that accidental faults or deliberate attack won't disable the system, the same way that NAB and Virgin Blue were almost completely shut down?

The national telephone-based warning capability is comprised of several elements that are managed by different stakeholders:

- Telstra as the *Emergency Alert* supplier;

- the State and Territory users and activators of *Emergency Alert*, which are within State and Territory warning agencies, and,

- the Location Based Number Store (LBNS) – the secure, central database owned by the Commonwealth (and operated by an external supplier) that serves as the data source for both the national system, *Emergency Alert*, and Western Australia's system, *StateAlert*.

Business continuity and system resilience were afforded high priority in the design and building of the LBNS. The LBNS system is duplicated at two geographically separate data centres, over 300 kms apart. Each data centre provides high levels of reliability and redundancy for network connectivity and power. Nightly backups of the LBNS system and data are also performed, providing restoration capability. The availability of the LBNS is monitored 24/7 basis by data centre staff and the LBNS contractor.

Emergency Alert and *StateAlert* have redundant connections to both LBNS sites, so in the event of one site failing or losing connectivity the other can be accessed.

The data centre and LBNS system have been IRAP (Infosec - Registered Assessor Program) assessed and comply with relevant sections of the Protective Security Manual and Information Security Manual to ensure the security of the system both physically and in relation to IT/external access.

The Commonwealth is not a party to the *Emergency Alert* contract. However, the system specifics in regard to the security, redundancy and business continuity were agreed by all States and Territories and implemented by the State and Territory government users of the system.

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4. I understand that YellowBird won this year's Community Resilience Award sponsored by the Insurance Council of Australia—have any steps have been taken to investigate or trial YellowBird? Have you any idea of the cost of this technology?

Primary responsibility for the protection of life and property rests with the States and Territories in their capacity as first responders. In light of this, and because States and Territories are best positioned to understand their jurisdiction's hazard profile and operating environment, they have full autonomy to select the warning devices or systems they consider appropriate. The Commonwealth does not determine which warning mechanisms or systems are adopted or tested by States and Territories, as they are best placed to determine their needs.

On 10 March 2009 the Attorney-General met with representatives from the ANU regarding the Yellow Bird system. Following this meeting, the Attorney-General wrote to his Ministerial Council for Police and Emergency Management – Emergency Management (MCPEM-EM) colleagues inviting them to contact the developers of the system should they be interested in the capability (and providing them with contact details of other private emergency warning providers that had made contact with the Attorney-General and his Department in the aftermath of the 2009 Victorian Bushfires).

The Attorney-General also wrote to Senator the Hon Kim Carr, Minister for Innovation, Industry, Science and Research and to Mr Bob McMullan, Parliamentary Secretary for International Development Assistance seeking consideration of whether innovation or overseas development assistance funds could be made available to assist in a pilot trial of the Yellow Bird system. As a result of the letter to Senator Carr, AusIndustry made contact with the system developers, who submitted an application for an AusIndustry "Climate Ready" grant for Yellow Bird. AGD was advised by AusIndustry that, although the application had merit, it was unsuccessful in gaining funding, due to the competitiveness of the round.

5. I understand that YellowBird has been shown to emergency service organisations in WA, SA, NSW and the ACT (with strong support) and that there is extensive support for YellowBird from organisations such as ABC Radio, Vision Australia, Red Cross, the Australasian Fire and Emergency Services Council (AFAC), the Bushfire CRC. Have there been any steps taken to investigate the use of this technology for emergency situations in Australia?

See response to Q4.

6. Given the extensive Federal Government investment in SMS News Alert, will AGD be making a submission to the QLD Floods Inquiry?

The Queensland Floods Commission of Inquiry's Terms of Reference address communications and warning systems. AGD is cooperating with the Commission to provide factual and background information in relation to the Commission's Terms of Reference. Whether a formal submission is required will depend on issues arising through the inquiry process.