

IGEM BUSHFIRE INQUIRY VICTORIA

I welcome the opportunity to make a submission to the Victorian Bushfire Inquiry, and would like to address the issue of “effectiveness of public information and warning systems, including cross-border coordination and communication”.

Fortunately I was not directly involved in the 2019 -2020 bushfires but, as a regionally-based person, bushfire seasons are a time of great anxiety. At these times I rely on the ABC for information about impending bushfires or other environmental crises. This has allowed me to stay safe at home, and earlier on it helped me to safely plan my regionally-based work in the health sector.

Over the recent fire season, the ABC provided an extensive background to local and state-wide conditions, as well as information about developing difficulties and, most importantly, real-time emergency alerts. The latter likely saved many Victorian lives during the recent fire season.

My relatives live in a rural farming area and have described their unease during the crisis. They have also talked about their reliance on the ABC for concise information about regional fire conditions, precise details about evolving emergency situations, and specific information about real time ‘stay or leave’ alerts in their local community environments.

The ABC Emergency Broadcasts are not replicated by any other services. The CFA and SES and, of course, neighbours provide information which is really important. They do not however have the capacity to address the situation now whereby bushfires travel incredibly quickly and unpredictably with crises unfolding in a manner that was previously unheard of.

The information that the ABC provides is crucial for volunteers whose responsibilities may cover adjoining geographical areas where fires are growing; it is critical when people’s lives are in peril; it is also critical when people’s future livelihoods are at risk - their stock, their housing, sheds and equipment. In providing real-time information it enables threatened communities to plan for safety, and to strategically focus their time and energy to protect people and property.

The ABC has devoted significant time, personnel and resources to cover the recent bushfires. This role is likely to be ongoing and increasing in scope. For example, I understand that the ABC had 256 Emergency Broadcasting events in the 2017/18 fire season, 371 in the 2018/19 season and 825 in the 2019/20 season up until mid-January.

The ABC was praised in February by the Senate for the amazing work it had undertaken during the bushfire emergency. In March a motion was introduced in the House of Representatives to recognise the ABC’s impressive work during the bushfires. The extra

work involved for the ABC over the emergency period is supposed to be in to the millions of dollars. My concern is that, at the same time that it is widely recognised how important the ABC is, its funding is being severely reduced. One-fifth of the ABC's operational budget was removed a number of years ago but it is also now the case that there is a funding freeze in place that will remove a further \$84 million over the next three years. It is believed that the outcome of this cost-cutting will remove around 200 ABC staff positions. I find this of concern and contrary to optimal policy implementation particularly in light of the fact that the ABC has recently been declared an Emergency Service during another crisis event.

Thank you for enabling me to participate in the Inquiry. I hope that the ABC's role may be acknowledged and that, as a result, it may be recognised that the ABC needs further financial support to continue its vital role.

References

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