

Denis Martin

5th Feb 2020

Albury Wodonga Regional ABC
1 High St Wodonga. 3690

Attention: Gaye Pattison

Dear Gaye

Re: Wording used in Fire Warnings

Preamble:

I am writing to you following the recent bushfires and how the wording of broadcast messages may be improved and therefore be more meaningful and accurate for listeners. I appreciate that the ABC is under strict guidelines as to how these messages are broadcast, therefore I will also be addressing my comments to other relevant Authorities including the Federal Member for Indi.

I am a long-term listener and supporter of the ABC and appreciate the value of the broadcaster as an independent and reliable source of information, particularly regarding regional news and events. These comments are not meant to be a criticism of the ABC, but rather to reflect what I am hearing from a whole range of people.

I discussed these matters with Sandra Moon at the ABC Studio on Friday 17th January.

My experience in firefighting and its associated effects generally is considerable, having been a long-term employee of DELWP (Dept Environment Land Water & Planning), an active volunteer firefighter with CFA and currently an active volunteer with VCC Em Min (Victorian Council of Churches Emergency Ministry). In my capacity with this later organization I participated in volunteering at Relief Centres during the current fires both at Tallangatta and Wangaratta.

The role of the VCC Em Min volunteers is to provide emotional support and listen to the stories of displaced people affected by natural disasters such as fires, floods and other impactful events. It is largely a listening and caring role and where necessary redirects people for more long-term help and or assistance. In addition to the volunteer work above, because of my past and current experiences I am often asked by a variety of community members for my views and or thoughts on fire related matters such as the way emergency messages are handled by the responsible bodies.

The issues:

I would like to address two major matters in relation to the messages broadcast during fire emergencies. First in relation to a need to mention the time when a message is delivered for broadcasting, secondly it does appear to me from many conversations that the siren sound used before some announcements is misunderstood by listeners.

Announcing a time when an emergency warning is made.

The same warnings when viewed on the Emergency Services web sites include the time of publication listed. My contention is that every time an announcement is made it should be preceded by inclusion of the time it was issued every time it is read out. For example:

"The watch and act message for residents of Nug Nug etc etc, issued at 10.00am is ...". Or, "Message timed at 10.00am is for residents of Nug Nug etc ..."

By this means anyone hearing the message can understand its currency. This is important because often messages may be repeated many times over a day and, they sometimes contain time estimates of when an area may be impacted.

That is... "The area of Nug Nug may be impacted by fire or ember attack in two hours".

If times of issue of the warning are included, then the message assumes more relevance and accuracy. One needs also to consider that often the internet is not available or is congested in many areas during large scale emergencies. Also, infrastructure is often damaged or destroyed and therefore the ABC as the nominated Emergency Services Broadcaster becomes the only means of communication.

Second, the siren sound warning:

I have a vague recollection around the time this warning sound was introduced as to its purpose, but now cannot remember when and why it is used. In fact, I am not really sure if it is in use much at all now. In preparation for writing this letter I asked just about everyone I came across to explain the how, why, when it is used. I don't think I received any correct answer.

I believe it is used when the very first announcement is made over the air when it is sounded once. Then if this first message is urgent, such as a "Watch and Act" then it is sounded twice in succession. This is my best "guess". The siren is then not sounded again for that fire.

The point about the warning sound is that it becomes ineffective if most people listening do not know what it means. During the current series of fires, I must admit I only rarely heard it and then I do not remember what the context was at the time.

If the community is becoming unaware of the relevance of the siren sound, perhaps this needs a lot of publicity early in the fire season to reacquaint people as to its purpose. Again, perhaps the advice of what it represents could be regularly included in new and updated warnings being broadcast along with the original time warnings are issued.

There is an obvious risk in the presentation of messages that too much detail is included. Again, from my observations and comments received, many people appear to switch off from the detail after the first few sentences. Another issue for another day perhaps.

I hope these comments are useful and I would be happy to call in at the Wodonga studio and discuss these thoughts more fully if necessary.

Yours Sincerely

Denis F Martin