

**NSW Independent Bushfire  
Inquiry  
May 2020**



# ABC submission to the NSW Independent Bushfire Inquiry

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## Executive Summary

The ABC's role in delivering bushfire-related warnings and other information helped to keep New South Wales communities safe during the "Black Summer" fires across 2019-20. This submission aims to highlight areas in which future arrangements could support and improve these vital services through:

- Collaboration with emergency authorities when planning for, and responding to, fires,
- Communication resources and tools to better inform the public, and
- Support for more resilient communications infrastructure.

## Introduction

The ABC is a trusted source of emergency services information that Australians rely on during natural disasters. It plays an important role in communicating warnings and alerts through radio, television, and digital media. The ABC also provides continuous or "rolling" live coverage when lives and property are under threat. The information delivered by the ABC helps to save lives and keep Australians informed about the impact of natural disasters on their communities.

The ABC's role as an emergency broadcaster was critical throughout the 2019-20 fire season. Its teams covered more than 900 incidents – a threefold increase on previous years – around the country. The ABC conducted more emergency broadcasting in New South Wales than in any other state.

Responding to the crisis, the ABC redirected resources to boost its emergency broadcasting and coverage. Staff were recalled from leave and teams and equipment were deployed interstate to support local teams in affected areas. The workload was immense, but the ABC's focus on keeping communities informed continued around the clock throughout the danger period.

Lessons were learned during the crisis. The number of fires was unprecedented, setting a much higher bar for the level of resources the ABC would need to deploy for future emergencies of similar magnitude. The scale of the fires and the number of concurrent incidents also made the task of maintaining timely and relevant warnings more complex. This was especially challenging when fires crossed state borders and ABC teams needed to deliver the right information using the different warning and communication systems peculiar to each state.

The ABC's submission to the Inquiry is based on these lessons. It is the ABC's view that Australia needs to be prepared for more frequent, and more severe, emergency events. A key component within this will processes for delivering the information communities will need to stay safe. It also needs highly resilient communications infrastructure for both radio broadcasts and mobile phone reception. These recommendations, as they relate to New South Wales, are set out below.

## Planning for, and Responding to, Fire Emergencies

The ABC works closely with emergency services to prepare communities for any potential threat from fires, floods, extreme weather, and anything else that could cause loss of life or damage to property. During emergencies, it delivers warnings and alerts via ABC radio and television broadcasts and online via ABC and social media platforms.

Coordination between the ABC and New South Wales emergency services has evolved over the years and is based on a high degree of cooperation. Current arrangements include emergency service training and accreditation for media, communication protocols for warnings and alerts, and media access to senior officers during emergency situations. The working relationship also benefits from a practical approach on both sides and trust which has developed from personal relationships between stakeholders at the local level. For example, particularly in the early stages of the New South Wales bushfire period, the ABC was given access to public safety information directly from emergency service briefings, reducing the amount of time needed to deliver the information to audiences.

In situations where a threat is close to, or crosses, a state or territory boundary, there is potential for confusion for audiences, especially those travelling across borders. This is due to the fact that the state-level emergency services each have their own warnings systems, communication methods, and agency structures. The different systems place extra demands on teams who are often working across states or at a national level to prepare and distribute warning and alert information.

The ABC believes the following measures could improve the planning and response for an emergency event:

- New South Wales Government support for the adoption of a nationally consistent three-level warning framework for all types of emergencies, using a single standard colour palette and icons, and a standard approach to assessing, communicating and displaying bushfire information, including in cross-border areas. The ABC understands that the Australasian Fire and Emergency Service Authorities Council (AFAC) is currently considering such a model.
- Ensure a nationally-standardised approach to Common Alerting Protocol (CAP) data. This would enable data to display threats in cross-border areas. Improvements to the CAP could include a unique and long-lived identifier for each incident and incremental ID numbers for updates. The data feed format itself should also be standardised to make it easier for apps and websites to process and publish warnings and alerts. This would enable apps and websites to deliver location-specific warnings and alerts to the public and include details of the areas under threat and any advice on action to take. The ABC would incorporate this data into its apps and websites as well as using it for broadcast warnings and alerts. A standardised approach to CAP could also aid the development of digital tracking maps to display all active emergencies.
- Increased collaboration between relevant state and regional emergency authorities and senior ABC staff for emergency preparation, response and recovery. The ABC and emergency agencies have seen the benefits of such work over many years. This has included, in multiple states and territories, an ABC manager being embedded within the state operation centre to coordinate the flow of information, including off-the-record information for planning and response purposes. It has also included ABC managers sitting on state and regional emergency management committees. The collaboration could include representation in relevant groups co-ordinated by the Public Information Functional Area Coordinator.

## Communication Resources and Tools

The ABC relies on official information in order to conduct emergency broadcasting and inform communities about emerging threats. Communication from the emergency agencies is key to the media delivering essential information to the public.

As a national organisation, the ABC has learned lessons from its involvement in emergencies across all states and territories. It has seen advantages in communication systems and approaches which could be considered by NSW authorities. Similarly, the ABC looks at the strengths of NSW systems and encourages other jurisdictions to consider them.

During peak periods of the recent NSW bushfire events, it was a challenge for the ABC to access the level of information it required to keep localised communities informed. In response to this, the ABC has identified measures that could improve communication during an emergency event:

- Increase public information resourcing within NSW emergency agencies to provide communication to media organisations and the community in a timely fashion. This could include additional resources to work during escalations of emergency events and making more local officials available to provide regular updates to local media in affected areas. Agencies should also have capacity to follow social media and broadcast coverage to hear reports from people in affected areas. During some peak bushfire periods, talkback callers to ABC Local Radio provided information that updated situations ahead of official notifications.
- NSW emergency agencies could communicate Watch and Act and Emergency warnings to media by email when they are issued. In all other jurisdictions, emergency agencies have email distribution lists which are used to disseminate warnings information to media contacts. This allows the media to be instantly notified of official information in a text format that can be quickly broadcast or posted on social media.
- Increase promotion of ABC Local Radio frequencies the community can tune to for emergency information. Currently NSW RFS warnings advise the public to “listen to your local radio station” without providing ABC Local Radio frequencies or links. Further promotion of specific localised frequencies could be considered (in warnings, on local road signs advising of fire danger ratings etc). This could assist both the local community and travellers unfamiliar with the ABC Local Radio station servicing the affected area.
- Increase promotion of the value of battery-powered radios as a backup solution in emergency situations. During the peak bushfire periods, many communities along the NSW South Coast were without electricity or telecommunication services. Internet and mobile phone services were not available. Often the use of battery-powered radios or car radios was the only option to hear emergency information.

## Maintaining Reliability

The ABC's ability to deliver critical emergency services information relies heavily on the communications infrastructure in affected areas. The more resilient and adaptable it is, the less likely local services will be lost when they are most needed. This includes both the transmission infrastructure required for radio and television, and the mobile phone and internet services required for digital devices.

During the "Black Summer" crisis period, the Mt Wanderer fire near Bateman's Bay shut down the main radio transmitters as well as power and mobile phone service. The ABC restored local radio service quickly using RN and ABC News frequencies, and this made it the only service available for audiences to hear about new fire threats. This illustrated how fires may disrupt communications that serve to keep people safe as well as the critical role transmitters play.

Fires threatened and prevented access to a number of transmitters during the crisis. As a result, transmitters needed to operate on backup systems for long periods while access was restricted. It also required the ABC and its transmission provider to find "work-arounds" when a transmitter could no longer operate without repairs or maintenance.

The ABC and its transmission provider were able to negotiate escorted access to transmitter sites to service and refuel backup systems. However, the process to gain access had to be undertaken with each relevant authority on a location-by-location basis. This added to the time and administrative effort required to bring transmitters back online.

In response to these experiences, the ABC would support measures to provide further "hardening" of transmitter sites to improve their resilience. It would also support improved national coordination of assistance for the ABC and its transmission partner to access sites affected by fires and other natural disasters.

In general, the ABC believes that the resilience of transmission infrastructure requires multiple redundant systems. These would include:

- standby power systems for transmitters with the capacity to operate for long periods without site attendance;
- content input redundancy that allows localised information to be delivered via multiple paths in the event one source is cut and cannot be restored quickly, and;
- sufficient site cooling that makes it more likely that services will continue to operate in the extreme temperatures that occur during bushfire events.

These redundancies are not uniformly present at all sites and may expensive to maintain. The ABC would welcome the opportunity to work with service providers to build more resilience into the network, and to identify priority sites for improved standby power equipment, should funding be available. The ABC would also welcome more portable and light weight transmission equipment to be deployed across the country. The transmission network in Australia is important national infrastructure that plays a vital role in keeping Australians safe.

In terms of mobile phone and internet access, Australia relies on commercial networks. during natural disasters, these services may be lost if power is affected or mobile network sites are damaged. This is due to the reliance on network electricity for most fixed line connections and the lack of redundancy in the commercial mobile network.

The increased reliance on mobile phones and the internet increases the need to make these services more resilient. As such, the ABC would support initiatives aimed at improving resilience in this area.

## **ABC Insights – Key Points**

For reference, the ABC's role in delivering emergency warnings, alerts, and coverage may be seen in audience data that reveals the demand for information across different platforms. A snapshot of this data shows that:

- Between 31 December 2019 and 14 January 2020, the ABC maintained live radio coverage about the fires for extended periods. For example, ABC Sydney and ABC NSW stations delivered a total of 296 hours of bushfire coverage.
- Audio streams of regional stations, which may be heard via mobile phones, were in high demand in fire-affected areas. For example, just in the week of 29 December to 4 January, the number of plays for ABC South East, based in Bega, increased 1,800%.
- Social media use escalated between December and January. The ABC Emergency Facebook page received the equivalent of a whole year's engagements (3.8 million) in one month and the accounts in eight fire-affected regions gained 85,000 new followers.