ANNEX 2A

Australian Broadcasting Corporation

The Australian Broadcasting Corporation has broadcast on radio, reports of all major disasters in Australia since its establishment in 1932, often to great acclaim, particularly when its coverage has been in isolated places, or where its staff had been the sole providers of information during catastrophic events. Emergencies had been covered as news - content that was interesting, important and useful - that was usually describing what was happening and why. Often this kind of news would roll for hours, and over the full length of a broadcast listeners would come to understand the full impact of what had occurred, and how they should respond. TV covered emergencies as news broadcasts. The digital age brought new platforms but similar content.

In January 1997, a new ABC Program Director at Local Radio in Melbourne, Victoria, Ian Mannix, changed the nature of this broadcasting, when arranging coverage of a massive bushfire which was started by an arsonist in the nearby Dandenong Ranges. The fires burnt aggressively for days. Three people died and forty homes were destroyed.

Mr Mannix, who had been a senior journalist in the ABC News and Current Affairs division for the previous decade, was unfamiliar with the nature of bushfire response. He contacted the Victorian Country Fire Authority and asked for advice on what to say to the listeners "who were confronted by flames". The Country Fire Authority had no experience in providing warnings. They had never written a warning for the person at risk.

With an offer by Mr Mannix that 774 ABC Local Radio Melbourne would broadcast the warning repeatedly and for as long as necessary, the Country Fire Authority Community Education Manager, Suisan McKenzie, wrote the first warning to be broadcast on radio. Surprisingly, and in a move that challenged the radio broadcasters, the warnings advised the residents to "stay at home".

This was a confronting message for the broadcasters and the community, but was based on the research at the time that people would be safe in their homes while a bushfire passed over, and they could then run outside to the already burnt area and survive. It was preferable to trying to flee in a car, or worse, on foot, into smoke and uncertainty. During the devastating 1983 Ash Wednesday bushfires in southern Australia, more than half of all deaths occurred when people fled their homes.

The warnings written by Ms McKenzie that day were long, full of jargon and contained no context and little understanding of the size of the threat. Over the next eight years ABC Local Radio Victoria worked with the Country Fire Authority to refine the process, and "emergency broadcasting" was born. The guidelines included agreeing to issue the warnings at set intervals, creating a distinctive alert sound to precede them on air; and new formats were created which resulted in two types of warning being created. A "bushfire alert" was read every 30 minutes, referring to a lower level bushfire where the threat was some hours away, and the other, an "urgent threat message" was read every 15 minutes referring to a much more serious and immediate threat.

The listeners came to rely on the warnings for early advice about an impending threat. Emergency broadcasting was implemented numerous times throughout summers in Victoria, which is the world's most bushfire prone region, from 1997-2006. But the system was confined to Victoria, despite Canberra suffering a major fire in 2005 that burnt 500 homes and killed six people; and in South Australia on the Eyre Peninsula nine people died when the fastest moving bushfires in Australia's history were experienced in that state.

In February 2009 Victoria suffered under a dozen bushfires, which killed 173 people, injured 2 500 more and destroyed or damaged ten thousand properties. The broadcasting on the day was dominated by the unfolding catastrophe as ABC Local Radio stations issued 12 simultaneous "Urgent threat messages" and more than ten "advices".

The process of gathering information from the fire ground, sending the information to a media office at fire headquarters, having them re-written and checked, and then passed to the radio broadcasters, was overwhelmed during the day and eventually the warning system collapsed for 24 hours. ABC Local Radio continued rolling coverage and used interviews with emergency agencies to give people they could use to respond to the event.

The resulting 2009 "Black Saturday" Bushfires Royal Commission called for the warning system to be enhanced; for it to be taken up by commercial radio stations and TV, and encouraged all fire agencies around Australia to implement the same system. A new warning system was created: "The Australian Bushfire Warning Framework". It included three warning levels: "Advice", (the authorities have confirmed a fire has started), "Watch and Act" (the authorities have confirmed the fire poses a threat to the community), and "Emergency Warning" (the authorities have confirmed there is an immediate threat to the community which must take action to survive). The system has since been revised to include all State Emergency Services agencies which respond to floods and storms.

The ABC has agreed it will issue these warnings whenever and wherever required, and will do so at 30 minute intervals for "Watch and Act" messages, and 15 minute intervals for "Emergency warnings". The principle behind the repetition is that the latest information will be updated and the listener can leave the radio, deal with the event and prepare, and return to the radio at a set time to hear the next latest information and warning. The public in Australia has now come to expect this level of service from the national broadcaster.

In order to ensure that the ABC staff can meet the expectations of the public, training and broadcast guidelines were created to ensure consistency across the country. The development is now under the direction of Ian Mannix, the Manager, Emergency Broadcasting and Community Development.

The guidelines for broadcasters are contained in a training booklet and are issued to all broadcasters and available in all studios:

– The warnings will be based on the urgency of the threat and the number of people involved.

– They will be repeated at 15, 30 or 60 minute intervals.

– All will be preceded by the distinctive "ABC Emergency alert" sound.

– Staff will receive an emergency broadcasting induction and annual training.

– ABC staff will work in partnership with emergency agencies to ensure the system is working well and reviewed annually.

– Any changes required by ABC staff to the wording of the warning will be referred to the agency for discussion first.

This has provided a reliable platform for all emergency agencies and the Bureau of Meteorology to issue all warnings for all hazards at any time of the day or night. The reliability however can depend on staffing and infrastructure. The ABC has committed itself to understanding the hazard environment to ensure it can forecast times when staff might be needed to issue warnings, and that at other times when an emergency comes by surprise, mechanisms are in place to ensure rapid response.

The ABC transmitters are owned by a private company, which has entered into an agreement with the ABC to further enhance the reliability of the service. The ABC advises the company that it is broadcasting warnings in a region, and works directly with its senior executives to ensure transmitters are well prepared to carry warning broadcasts. This can include:

– Switching from external to generator power to ensure that if the power goes out due to the emergency, the sudden trip will not result in loss of transmission.

– Re-tuning transmitters to a stand-by satellite frequency should the local telecommunications link be at risk, for example during a cyclone.

– Refuelling the generators out of normal maintenance time to ensure the transmitters can run on the generator for extended periods.

The broadcast company has also flown stand-by transmitters to various locations where emergency broadcasts are occurring in case one of the transmitters is isolated or put out of action.

The ABC believes it is the only broadcast organisation in the world which issues warnings in partnership with emergency agencies in this way. The warnings are now part of the emergency landscape throughout Australia. The ABC has used the guidelines to direct warnings online and on TV, and will continue to work with emergency agencies to improve the service as new technology develops more effective ways of issuing warnings to the community to help keep them safe and recover.