

Submission

14 September 2023

Select Committee on Australia's Disaster Resilience
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Re: Select Committee on Australia's Disaster Resilience

The Australian Communications Consumer Action Network (**ACCAN**) thanks the Senate Select Committee (**the Committee**) for the opportunity to submit to the consultation on Australia's Disaster Resilience.

ACCAN is the peak body that represents consumers on communications issues including telecommunications, broadband, and emerging new services. ACCAN provides a strong unified voice to industry and government as we work towards communications services that are trusted, inclusive and available for all.

Natural Disasters can have catastrophic impacts on telecommunications connectivity across Australia. In response to the impacts that natural disasters may have on telecommunications consumers in regional, rural, and remote areas, ACCAN believes the Committee should consider:

- An approach which utilises multiple forms of technology to effectively communicate the risks posed by natural disasters.
- Expanding the availability and take up of radio as a crucial medium for providing emergency warnings.
- Strategies which improve the disaster resilience of travellers to regional, rural, and remote communities. This should include provisions, policies, and actions to improve the safety and preparedness skills of travellers.
- Further supporting people living with a disability in regional, rural, and remote Australia in the context of natural disasters.

Australians living in regional, rural, and remote areas are likely to experience natural disasters

Research conducted by Essence Communications Australia (**ECA**) noted that:

- 76% of Australians living in regional/rural or major regional centres had experienced a natural disaster in the last 5 years.¹
- 70% of Australians living in regional/rural or major regional centres identify the area in which they live as prone to disasters such as bushfires, grassfires, extreme weather and destructive storms, heavy rain, cyclones or floods'.²

¹ Essence. 2023. *Strengthening Telecommunications Against Natural Disasters*. p.13. Available at:

https://www.infrastructure.gov.au/sites/default/files/strengthening-telecommunications-against-natural-disasters_1.pdf.

² Ibid.

Many Australians are unsure about how prepared they are to experience telecommunications problems during a natural disaster. These assumptions can materially impact how people prepare for, and behave during, a natural disaster. Research by ECA noted that:

- ‘Many over-estimate their understanding of how telecommunications work with regional, rural and remote Australians more likely to make a conservative assessment of their preparedness for an outage in a natural disaster while urban residents are somewhat over-confident’.³
- ‘Due to a lack of understanding and preparedness, Australians lack resilience when it comes to the ability to manage without telecommunications services in a natural disaster – for those with experience, regardless of how much preparation they did, there was still an element of being unprepared’.⁴

Communications networks rely on a reliable energy network which natural disasters may disrupt

The Royal Commission into Australia’s natural disaster resilience found that ‘for the most part, the lifestyles and daily activities of Australians are heavily dependent on interconnected systems for the delivery of essential services’.⁵ During natural disaster events, the infrastructure of essential networks, especially energy and telecommunications, are simultaneously at risk and introduce compounding risk factors which impact the safety of consumers in natural disasters.⁶ The interdependencies between sectors and their role in emergency responses warrants a holistic approach to natural disaster resilience, response and recovery, particularly in high-risk areas.⁷

The use of radio in communicating information about natural disaster preparedness should be expanded in regional, rural and remote Australia

Satellite phone communications appear to function effectively in some natural disaster settings, however they may be hindered by their high cost and slow deployment periods.⁸ The government should undertake further research to determine the effectiveness of satellite phone communications in a natural disaster context given the promising indications of existing research on their utility.⁹ Satellites may provide effective sources of communications redundancy to critical facilities during a natural disaster.¹⁰ However, one technology cannot be solely relied upon for communications during a natural disaster.¹¹

ACCAN notes that in the coming decade, significant investment into Low Earth Orbit Satellites (LEOSats) will change the landscape of regional communications. LEOSat technology is rapidly evolving and there may be uncertainty surrounding its reliability during severe natural disaster contexts such as wildfires and floods where the technology may be unreliable. Satellite technology, including LEOSats, should not be entirely relied upon to ensure the continuity of communications

³ Essence. 2023. *Strengthening Telecommunications Against Natural Disasters*. p.4. Available at:

https://www.infrastructure.gov.au/sites/default/files/strengthening-telecommunications-against-natural-disasters_1.pdf.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Commonwealth of Australia. 2020. *Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements – Report*. p.70. Available at:

<https://naturaldisaster.royalcommission.gov.au/publications/royal-commission-national-natural-disaster-arrangements-report>.

⁶ The world bank group. 2019. *No Broken Link: The Vulnerability of Telecommunication Infrastructure to Natural Hazards (English)*. p.40.

Available at: <https://documents.worldbank.org/en/publication/documents-reports/documentdetail/951991560791754833/no-broken-link-the-vulnerability-of-telecommunication-infrastructure-to-natural-hazards>.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Fair Tech Institute. 2022. *The role of satellite communications in disaster management*. p.12. Available:

<https://fairtechinstitute.org/research/the-role-of-satellite-communications-in-disaster-managment/>.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Fair Tech Institute. 2022. *The role of satellite communications in disaster management*. p.27. Available:

<https://fairtechinstitute.org/research/the-role-of-satellite-communications-in-disaster-managment/>.

¹¹ Ibid p.27.

during natural disasters. Recent expansions in satellite investment should not prohibit the government from ensuring that radio technologies and emergency preparedness are expanded upon in the case of natural disasters.

In contexts where traditional telecommunications connectivity has been rendered unavailable through the course of a natural disaster, radio has been noted as the most effective and resilient technology to forewarn Australians in regional, rural and remote areas about the risks of natural disasters.¹² The ECA report noted that:

- 'ABC radio is considered the most reliable and available source of information in a telecommunications outage'.¹³
- ABC radio was considered essential to emergency information broadcasting and communities feel passionately about their local ABC radio station'.¹⁴
- Radio was mainly accessed through vehicles and battery-operated radio receivers.¹⁵

Additionally, the ECA report noted that social media was considered invaluable due to its nature as a cost effective and timely way of communicating with the community.¹⁶ Many online sources of information already direct consumers to listen to ABC radio for crucial updates during disasters.¹⁷

Many consumers have an over reliance on established reliable technologies which may not be effective in the context of a natural disaster

A concerning number of Australians believe that telecommunications may be more reliable than they are during a natural disaster, possibly leading to harm if a natural disaster should occur. The ECA report noted that:

- 30% of surveyed consumers did not believe that landline phone connections and power could be affected during a natural disaster.¹⁸
- 20% of surveyed consumers did not believe that mobile or internet services could be affected during a natural disaster.¹⁹

The ECA report also noted that 'less than 4 in 10 of residents who consider the area in which they live to be at risk of natural disasters believe they are prepared for a telecommunications outage should they experience a natural disaster'.²⁰

¹² Essence. 2023. *Strengthening Telecommunications Against Natural Disasters*. p.41. Available at:

https://www.infrastructure.gov.au/sites/default/files/strengthening-telecommunications-against-natural-disasters_1.pdf

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ These include; NSW First Tourism Resilience – *Respond during a bushfire or natural disaster*. Available at:

<https://www.destinationnsw.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/respond-during-a-bushfire-or-natural-disasters-tourism-resilience-nsw-first-program.pdf>. | Get ready Queensland. Be ready central west. *Preparing for natural disasters*. Available at:

<https://www.longreach.qld.gov.au/downloads/file/825/get-ready-central-west-flip-book>. | Techsun Radios Australia. *Emergency Preparedness*. Available at: <https://www.tecsunradios.com.au/store/emergency-preparedness/>. | Queensland Fire and Emergency Services. *Use of NBN during emergency events*. Available at: <https://www.qfes.qld.gov.au/safety-education/use-of-nbn>.

¹⁸ Essence. 2023. *Strengthening Telecommunications Against Natural Disasters*. p.37. Available at:

https://www.infrastructure.gov.au/sites/default/files/strengthening-telecommunications-against-natural-disasters_1.pdf.

¹⁹ Essence. 2023. *Strengthening Telecommunications Against Natural Disasters*. p.37. Available at:

https://www.infrastructure.gov.au/sites/default/files/strengthening-telecommunications-against-natural-disasters_1.pdf.

²⁰ Ibid. p.38.

The natural disaster preparedness of Australia should consider the experiences of travellers

The ECA report noted that travellers may be at a greater risk of harm during a natural disaster. The ECA report also noted:

- ‘People without relevant experience or understanding of the impact of a natural disaster are less aware of the need to prepare in a disaster-prone area and often believe they are more prepared than they potentially are’.²¹
- ‘In the context of travelling to regional areas, urban travellers indicated more concerns and fears about losing telecommunications during a natural disaster’.²²
- ‘There was a stark difference between the resilience of regional/rural residents compared to others’.²³

The government should consider the implications of the ECA report and develop further strategies to address the risks faced by travellers to rural, regional, and remote areas in the context of natural disasters.

People living with a disability in regional, rural and remote Australia should be further supported to prepare for natural disasters

Australians living with disabilities in regional, rural, and remote Australia are especially vulnerable to communications outages during natural disasters. Depending on the nature of the disability experienced by the consumer and the area that they live in, it may be difficult for them to access and use communication services in an emergency context. It is essential to ensure that these individuals are supported during a natural disaster.

ACCAN previously submitted to many consultations on the accessibility requirements of people living with a disability in relation to natural disasters and emergencies. These consultations include:

- The Regional Telecommunications Review 2021.²⁴
- The Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements.²⁵
- Lessons to be learned in relation to the Australian bushfire season 2019-20.²⁶
- New South Wales, South Australian, and Victorian State Bushfire Inquiries.²⁷

ACCAN would like to highlight some key recommendations from the above submissions in relation to natural disaster resilience. These recommendations include:

- Retail service providers, NBN Co and state and territory governments must ensure communications consumers are appropriately informed about the reliability of communications services during emergencies and the possible back up options available to them.²⁸

²¹ Essence. 2023. *Strengthening Telecommunications Against Natural Disasters*. p.5. Available at:

https://www.infrastructure.gov.au/sites/default/files/strengthening-telecommunications-against-natural-disasters_1.pdf.

²² Ibid. p.50.

²³ Ibid. p.51.

²⁴ ACCAN. 2021. *2021 Regional Telecommunications Review*. Available at: <https://accan.org.au/accans-work/submissions/1921-2021-regional-telecommunications-review>.

²⁵ ACCAN. 2020. *Submission to the Bushfire Royal Commission*. Available at: <https://accan.org.au/accans-work/submissions/1705-2019-20-bushfire-submissions>.

²⁶ ACCAN. 2020. *Lessons to be learned in relation to the Australian bushfire season 2019-20*. Available at: <https://accan.org.au/accans-work/submissions/1705-2019-20-bushfire-submissions>.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ ACCAN. 2020. *Lessons to be learned in relation to the Australian bushfire season 2019-20*. p.4. Available at: <https://accan.org.au/accans-work/submissions/1705-2019-20-bushfire-submissions>.

- Consumers must be provided with clear information in a range of accessible formats regarding preparing for an emergency or disaster situation in which communications access may be affected. This information must also be provided in a range of community and Indigenous languages.²⁹
- The ABC must be adequately funded to continue providing tailored, local information across a range of platforms.³⁰
- Alternative methods for providing information or alerts to members of the public must be explored in order to improve the resiliency of information transmission in emergency situations.³¹
- All consumers, including National Relay Service users, must be ensured equal access to the emergency call service through the establishment of next generation Triple Zero services.³²
- Any existing bushfire preparation or emergency management plans must be reviewed to ensure that telecommunications providers and NBN Co are sufficiently involved in emergency preparation and response.³³

Additionally, the Committee should consider examining the effectiveness of international responses to natural disasters and seek cooperation with international authorities on their management of communications during natural disasters.

We thank the Committee for the opportunity to comment on the Australia's disaster resilience. Should you wish to discuss any of the issues raised in this submission further, please do not hesitate to contact me at: con.gouskos@accan.org.au.

Yours sincerely,

Con Gouskos

Policy Officer

The Australian Communications Consumer Action Network (ACCAN) is Australia's peak communication consumer organisation. The operation of ACCAN is made possible by funding provided by the Commonwealth of Australia under section 593 of the Telecommunications Act 1997. This funding is recovered from charges on telecommunications carriers. ACCAN is committed to reconciliation that acknowledges Australia's past and values the unique culture and heritage of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. [Read our RAP](#)

²⁹ ACCAN. 2020. Lessons to be learned in relation to the Australian bushfire season 2019-20. p.4. Available at: <https://accan.org.au/accans-work/submissions/1705-2019-20-bushfire-submissions>.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.