



**The National Ethnic and Multicultural
Broadcasters' Council (NEMBC)**

Submission to

2009 Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission

18 May 2009

Russell Anderson
Executive Officer
National Ethnic and Multicultural Broadcasters' Council
PO Box 1144
Collingwood VIC 3066
Phone: (03) 9486 9549
Email: exec@nembc.org.au
Website: www.nembc.org.au

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This submission addresses the issue of communications and the need for policy development particularly in relation to community radio stations. The NEMBC is a peak body that advocates for ethnic and multicultural community broadcasters in Australia.

The following short stories, taken from interviews with community radio stations, show that the stations played a vital role during the Black Saturday fires. It is clear that community radio stations have been able to save lives because of their broadcasts and they continue to provide valuable ongoing assistance.

Community radio has the distinct advantage of having local knowledge, understanding the local geography and the people that live in the community. Community radio stations received phone calls after the fires telling how they had saved peoples lives. A community radio station in Alexandra, 3UGFM, were the first to broadcast warnings of the fires advancing on Marysville. These early warnings helped many people to start their fire plan or prepare for the evacuation.

Community radio stations are themselves members of *the community* and accordingly there is a willingness and reliance to assist. During the fires Gippsland FM allowed the local ABC to broadcast using their frequency, after the ABC's transmitter was destroyed in the fires. As a response to requests from Marysville residents 3UGFM built a radio studio that started broadcasting on the 17th of May 2009. Many stations have assisted in appeals and raised money or clothing during the emergency relief.

There's an army of volunteers at community radio stations consisting of trained staff and many with professional radio backgrounds. Plenty Valley radio, for example, was able to use its professional staff to operate the studio and provide information to residents during the Saturday night of the fires.

The recommendations in this submission are that community radio stations be supported through government legislation and policy by being included in emergency services information during disasters. They should be recognised and assisted for the essential role they play during an emergency relief period. Community radio also plays a vital ongoing role as the stations and broadcasters are community members and they continue to assist in the long term development and trauma that the community feels. Community radio needs to be adequately supported to perform all of these tasks.

3UGFM Community Radio in Alexandra

Community radio station 3UGFM is based in Alexandra and is north of the two major fires of Kilmore and Murrindindi Shire, and was in the centre of emergency efforts. Alexandra became a *fire control centre* and many emergency warnings were given from this point.

UGFM was broadcasting emergency warning and keeping its listeners up to date as the fire developed. 3UGFM had established a good relation with the local emergency management committee and they received a lot of information from local people that they knew and trusted, and it was information they could get from people that were close to the fires. They were able to alert residents in advance of the fire front. UGFM provided the first communication to the town of Marysville at 5pm, this was followed by an ABC report half an hour later. The fire front hit Marysville at around 7pm and UGFMs reports alerted resident for a fire plan and the evacuation. UGFM at times gave reports that contradicted the official view but their information was correct. An ABC Four Corners website report gives a chronology of how UGFMs assisted:
www.abc.net.au/4corners/special_edds/20090427/fires2/chronology.htm

People said that UGFM saved lives. They received many phone calls afterwards saying that people heard their reports and were able to leave their house and get out to safety on time. Many presenters worked very long shifts, day and night during the emergency period. They continued to broadcast as the emergency relief period persisted.

3UGFM has four transmitters to repeat their signal around the hills of Flowerdale and Kinglake. They lost 2 of the transmitters during the fires, however the primary and secondary transmitters at Alexandra and Yea still provided reasonable coverage until access was gained 6 days later with bulldozers, temporary antennas fitted and powered by generators for 4 weeks to re establish those two services.

As many know the town of Marysville was destroyed and they are very slowly trying to rebuild. 3UGFM has answered the call from local residents of Marysville and is assisting to set up a radio studio and train local residents for on-air broadcasting. The studio will open on the 17th of May as part of a Communications Services Hub established in the town centre.

Plenty Valley Radio - 3PVR FM 88.6 in Mill Park

Community radio Plenty Valley is based in Mill Park in a suburban setting on the outskirts of Melbourne. Mill Park is slightly further away from the fires and while there was no smoke or embers falling in their area they broadcast into the Murrindindi Shire.

As the bushfires developed on Black Saturday Plenty Valley started to receive reports on the fires. They received up-dates from the Country Fire Authority (CFA), and went into bushfire mode in the afternoon and started broadcasting the warnings as they arrived. By the evening the severity of the fire was realised and further steps were taken at the station. Normal programming was halted. Four experienced broadcasters and presenters were called and they volunteered their time at the station. They developed a schedule and worked through the night till 2am next morning. They chased material and actively sought out reliable sources to keep people informed during the night.

In any emergency reporting accurate information is essential so as not to cause speculation or alarm. In the case of these fires communication was difficult and misinformation could send people in the wrong direction. Program manager Roly

Simms said “he was proud of the work they did in tough circumstances. The volunteers did the best they could with what they had. They handled the situation very professionally and reliable information was broadcast”.

On Sunday PVR found themselves getting up-dated information and found themselves more in-the-loop of local emergency warnings. Spot fires were still a problem and the emergency levels remained high as fires continued to burn.

Normal broadcasting returned to Plenty Valley on Sunday. All presenters were briefed and they collected the latest emergency updates. Plenty Valley has 11 ethnic programs that broadcast in the evening during the week days. The presenters of these programs relayed the information on the bushfires in their language to the local community.

Gippsland FM - 3GCR FM - 104.7 in Morwell

Two different fires fronts were either side of the township of Morwell, where 3GCR broadcasts.

Two young boys doing a youth program on Saturday evening began to receive calls from distressed residents. Not many people knew the fires had destroyed all transmitters, on Mount Tassie. People were effectively cut-off from any local news and information as they searched for television stations or radio frequencies. 3GCR’s transmitters, however, had survived because it was located on a different hilltop and the two boys were broadcasting their program.

It wasn’t long before the local ABC radio contacted the two boys at 3GCR. Maree Orr, a board member and administration officer, got the news from the boys and had to do some quick thinking. Maree set up the live-to-air studio as though it was a live phone interview and was able to transmit the local ABC through the 3GCR transmitter. The phone-connection however would drop out every few hours. Maree spent the night and early hours of the morning going into the station to reconnect the phone line.

3GCR realised the severity of the situation and allowed the ABC to broadcast for 48 hours. The local ABC was able to receive local CFA emergency information and had calls from local people and warned of fire fronts, smoke and wind changes.

3GCR returned to normal programming by Tuesday and the stations volunteers banded together and were able to receive information from the emergency services and put together packages of information for the ongoing emergency relief. The local ethnic presenter’s broadcasted information in their languages during their evening programs.

During the week 3GCR received many phone calls with some of them being live-to-air interviews. The station became an important channel for people to share their stories. While many of the phone calls didn’t go to air, the volunteers staffing the administration office spoke to people about their experiences and traumas effectively acting as a counselling centre.

One couple with a child and a dog that were trapped in the fires gave their thanks to 3GCR. Their phone lines were down, their mobile wasn’t working and the electricity was cut due to the fires. With smoke filling the air around them they were trying to decide whether to stay or go. They tuned into 3GCR and got information that it wasn’t safe to leave. They believed that decision saved their lives.

3KLFM in Bendigo.

As well as the major outbreaks in the Marysville and Kinglake regions during Black Saturday there were fires East of Bendigo at Redesdale and other smaller fires west of Ballarat in the Colac and Skipton areas.

When bushfires invade rural towns local knowledge is a major factor in providing details and understanding street layout, urban topography and the extent that suburbia has encroached on the native bush. This detail is essential for fire alert and evacuation systems to be effective. The ABC, as the national emergency broadcaster, provided a state wide coverage but was unable to provide this in-depth local (area specific) detail.

The local community station (KLFM) has live announcers that can be on-air in excess of 18 hours a day and for 7 days a week, most regional and rural community stations operate this way. When the announcer at KLFM was notified, by a listener, of the fire at Maiden Gully (that went on to destroy at least 60 homes) an attempt was made to obtain information from the CFA fire control centre. Mike Tobin, President of the Community Broadcasters Association of Victoria said “they were told by the media person that they (the CFA) did not bother with small community stations, meanwhile the ABC was in an information overload and at the commercial station the information was filling the in-tray of an unstaffed fax machine. The local commercial station was on syndicated networking with unstaffed local studios.”

It took the management of KLFM about one and a half hours of negotiation, with personal contacts within the Department of Sustainability and the Environment (DSE), before it was able to have the D.S.E. and C.F.A. media releases forwarded to the station.

Most towns in rural Victoria have advisory signs as one enters the built-up area to suggest that information services are broadcast on 88.0 MHZ, however very few towns actually provide this service.

Most country towns have coverage from one or more community radio stations. Local councils could display on small signs on rural roads and when entering townships the community radio stations call-signs as an emergency frequency. This would be a very small cost and would provide additional security for both locals and visitors. The cost benefit could be people's lives.

Yarra Valley FM 99.1

Yarra Valley radio is situated in the Yarra Ranges south of the main fires of Murrindindi and also to the west of the Bunyip National Parks fires.

Yarra Valley FM started to hear information about the fires on Saturday afternoon when residents rang in to see if the station had any information. Apparently they were ringing because they couldn't get through to emergency services because of congested lines. They were asking what the station thought, 'if they should stay or go'. Surprisingly there were calls coming from far away at the edge of the broadcasting footprint, to the Dandenong's.

Normally on the Saturday afternoon the youth program is on and only a young person would be at the station. Luckily the station had a group of experienced broadcasters

doing production work at the studio when the phone calls came in. They quickly ceased to do their production work and started gathering reports about the fires. Another fortunate event occurred when the emergency *incident centre* was established a few doors down from the radio station. Broadcasters could walk down to receive up-to-date information and could hold interviews with the Country Fire Authority or the Department of Sustainability and Environment.

Because of the hills many people in Yarra Valley couldn't pick up the ABC so Yarra Valley FM was the only source of information to some members of the community.

At night it was difficult to maintain a flow of regular information so with agreement from the ABC Yarra Valley re-broadcast ABC radio 774 from midnight to 6am. They were able to do this because 774 'streams' on the internet and Yarra Valley used a computer and streaming to rebroadcast.

As the days went by, the process for gathering information improved. Originally information would come in by fax and this meant in the night someone had to be sitting next to the fax machine. Peter Cornish, the Chairman, set up an sms delivery system by registering with all of the emergency centres and then through an email account he set up with bigpond, he was able to forward all the emails to his mobile phone on sms's. Thus he got information day and night from where ever he was. He could also send these sms's onto people quickly if necessary.

After the weekend there was continued need to broadcast ongoing emergencies, including continuing fire alerts, the relief effort, fund raising and where people could volunteers their services.

The question about broadcasting reliable factual information was an issue and always a 'tricky situation'. At one stage the radio received a reliable report stating that the Healesville Hospital was being evacuated. It was however found to be untrue when checked by a broadcaster. Information did come in about bushfires from reliable sources but Yarra Valley would always re-check the information before broadcasting. If it was unofficial information it was always stated that it was not the 'official position'.

Many listeners called to thank the station for their broadcasts. One caller spoke of how they got out of Marysville and for most of the time they were guided by the broadcasting of Yarra Valley's radio. They would stop at a town and listen to the broadcasts before they would move on to the next town. They believe this made it possible to find a safe passage out.

Yarra Valley have assisted in the ongoing relief efforts. The Country Women's Association was able to do a large local collection assisted by the coverage of Yarra Valley.

It is hard to estimate exactly how many people community radio stations assist. However the system overload of Yarra Valley's internet radio service provides some indication of the necessity of this service for the community. Yarra Valley radio streams on the internet and during the fires their internet site crashed from a saturation of hits. They estimated there were 10 times more the amount than usual to make it crash. It could be possible they were receiving at least 10 times more listeners during the fires.

ASSISTANCE FROM OTHER COMMUNITY RADIO'S

Other community radio stations assisted with the relief effort. These are just some of the stations that provided assistance;

- 4EB in Brisbane organised an appeal and they administered to the funds receiving \$50,000 within a month and gave half the appeal to the bushfires in Victoria and the other half to the floods in Northern Queensland. The Red Cross was so appreciative they told 4EB that none of their money would be used in administration but all the money would go directly to victims of the disasters.
- 3ZZZ in Melbourne assisted with fund raising by running community announcements to promote the emergency appeal of the Red Cross.
- RRR-FM did emergency relief packages. A radio program called "Transference" sent out a single call for toiletries – from clean sheets to baby wipes. There was a huge response so a community announcement was made and ran for a day. The performance area at 3RRR began to fill up. People donated their time and vehicles and most of the drop off areas in the Murrindindi Shire received toiletry packages from 3RRR.
- 3CR ran community announcements and pointed people towards the websites where people could volunteer their services. Programmers picked up stories about the fires and focused on other issues not being covered by the mainstream media including the loss of animals and wildlife. 3CR continues to broadcast and keep the issues alive.

CONCLUSION

All of the community radio stations have felt the trauma of the disaster, both inside their stations and within their own community. Peter Weeks, President and General Manager from UGFM is still dealing with the shock and is concerned that while the fires are out forty percent of the shire has been destroyed, as well as homes and peoples lives the local economy has suffered and will need to be rebuilt. Dealing with the trauma is an ongoing part of the tragedy. There is also the issue of future disasters and how to deal with them.

A major lesson learnt from the fires is that community radio can play a vital role during any emergency. Community radio has the distinct advantage of having local knowledge, understanding the local geography and the people that live in the community. Community radio stations are themselves members of *the community* and accordingly there is a willingness and reliance to assist. There's an army of volunteers at a community radio station which includes trained staff and many with people with diverse professional backgrounds.

Once the main disaster has occurred community radio stations play a vital role in the emergency relief period. There was an estimated 7,500 people left homeless from the fires and community radio continues to bring those people information. There is also the ongoing role in the long term rebuilding of peoples lives and strengthening the community. The assistance given by a community radio (3UGFM) in establishing a radio studio in Marysville is a great example of this involvement.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1) Legislation and protocols need to be developed or improved between the government emergency services and community radio stations so that the stations

can be better informed and included in warnings. While agreements may already exist a standardisation across the state would improve communications during a disaster.

- 2) As part of these protocols community radio stations need to be involved in the emergency services, specifically in training and involvement prior to any disasters.
- 3) Emergency communications methods are currently limited and need to be improved. For example:
 - Not just faxes sent to the community stations but new technologies used such as sms's to designated community stations representatives.
 - Road signs need to include the frequencies of community radio stations as recognised emergency warning services.
- 4) Government could assist in delivering better services for community radio stations to prepare for a crisis. For example community radio stations need to consider that they will be in the front line and may lose equipment or may need back-up options or to become mobile to continue broadcasting. Funding in this area will need to be considered.
- 5) Increasingly rural areas are becoming more multicultural and many community radio stations have ethnic broadcasters. These broadcasters could play a vital role in broadcasting warnings, emergency relief and information in their language.