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Committee Secretary
Senate Standing Committee on Environment and Communications
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Dear Sir/Madam

Re: Inquiry into the capacity of communication networks and emergency warning systems to deal with emergencies and natural disasters

Free TV Australia is the peak industry body representing each of Australia's commercial free-to-air television licensees. Free TV Australia welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Senate Standing Committee on Environment and Communication's inquiry into communications networks and emergencies and natural disasters.

Commercial free to air television broadcasters play a vital role in the dissemination of critical emergency information – a role they take very seriously and a role which is highly valued by local communities and local emergency management services.

The *Broadcasting Services Act 1992* and the Commercial Television Industry Code of Practice set down detailed requirements for the timely and accurate broadcast of emergency information to a licensee's local community and all free-to-air commercial broadcasters comply with these requirements as a minimum. Importantly, all emergency broadcast information is provided in text and oral form, to maximise the accessibility of vital information.

Section 1.27 of the Commercial Television Industry Code of Practice includes requirements for licensees to have in place adequate procedures to enable the timely and accurate broadcast of emergency information to their communities. They are required to consult with appropriate emergency and essential service organisations within the licensed area and implement internal procedures to enable the dissemination of emergency information.

Appendix 3 of the Code provides further detailed advice to broadcasters to assist them in determining what is an emergency and in identifying appropriate emergency services organisations. Relevantly, Appendix 3 identifies emergencies as "in general situations in which there is an imminent or actual threat within the community, whereby life or property are at risk and which requires a significant and coordinated response by emergency or essential service organisations."

The *Broadcasting Services Act 1992* also addresses emergency broadcasts. It is a condition of broadcasters' licences that they will, upon written notification from the Minister that an emergency has arisen which makes it important in the public interest that persons authorised by the Minister have control over the content on that broadcaster's facilities, allow those persons access to and control over those facilities.

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Free TV Australia has also supported the development of the *National Guidelines & Broadcast levels for the broadcast of emergency warnings* by the Federal Government. These guidelines set down a consistent set of national processes for cooperation between emergency management services and all media sectors.

At a practical level, commercial broadcasters have very close working relationships with local emergency services and have established efficient processes for the rapid receipt and broadcast of emergency information. This covers storm warnings, cyclone alerts, fire danger information, fire and flood alerts and many other kinds of ad-hoc warning messages. The value that arises from these close working relationships was evident in recent detailed and significant news coverage of the Queensland and Victorian floods and Cyclone Yasi.

The provision of emergency information is also targeted to relevant communities, with broadcasters able to target the transmission of the information to distinct geographic regions within their licence areas.

Electronic News Gathering Spectrum

In delivering coverage of major natural disasters and other emergencies, free-to-air broadcasters rely on access to the 2.5 GHz spectrum band. Networks Seven, Nine and Ten together with the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC), are currently licensed to use the 2.5GHz band for Television Outside Broadcasting (TOB) on an Australia-wide basis.

TOB comprises a number of activities including electronic news gathering, television outside broadcasts and electronic field production all of which are heavily deployed during coverage of natural disasters and other emergency events. Continued access to spectrum for TOB is vital if free-to-air broadcasters are to continue to be able to serve the public interest in providing coverage of natural disasters and other emergencies.

The Australian Communications and Media Authority is currently coordinating a process to re-purpose and re-allocate (auction) the 2.5 GHz band so as to make it suitable for new, high-speed wireless access services. This involves the identification of alternative spectrum access for TOB and electronic news gathering. Whilst alternative spectrum has been identified which has the potential to support TOB operation, further work is required to ensure broadcasters are able to deliver an equivalent service to that currently provided.

Free TV submits this process stands to have a significant impact on the future coverage of natural disasters and other emergencies and should be noted by the Senate Committee as an issue relevant to this current inquiry.

Yours sincerely



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for
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CEO