

Broadcasters hit out at radio silence during fire crisis



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Federal Politics



Braidwood FM's Bill McGinnis, Rod McClure, Gordon Waters and Gavin Pillage. The community radio station was a vital source of information during the Black Summer bushfires. Picture: Jamila Toderas

A community radio station which was the sole local source of information for its listeners during the Black Summer bushfires says it found it tough to get updates from officials during the crisis.

[Braidwood FM ran a two month-long program](#) to keep residents informed about the bushfires which threatened the town on two sides.

Station manager Gordon Waters told a Senate inquiry on Wednesday he and Rod McClure provided 14 straight days of bushfire updates over the radio.

"There was no local ABC coverage and there was no local commercial station coverage so for listeners in our area we were the only source of information from the ground," Mr Waters said.

"This became in some cases do or die for listeners, making decisions whether to evacuate or to stay and defend their properties, and they were so reliant on our information."

However getting that information was one of the biggest challenges the station faced, Mr Waters said.

"We found it very difficult at times to contact the emergency management authorities to get accurate information or any information at all," Mr Waters said.

"One of the officers in the Queanbeyan-Lake George zone was brilliant and they were a lifeline for us in providing the bulk of the accurate information.

"We struggled getting information from the Eurobodalla Zone ... We had direct mobile phone numbers and quite often the Eurobodalla phone would go unanswered."

Mr Waters said he believed their unresponsiveness was due to the extraordinary range of the fire and resourcing issues.

Community Broadcasting Association of Australia chief executive Jon Bissett said community radio stations should be seen as complementing the public and commercial broadcasters.

"You have to draw a distinction between the ABC and commercial radio's view of local and community radio, which is probably a lot more hyper-local," he said.

"I think there's often this discussion of local about what it means, in the case of the ABC, it's the entire of southeast NSW in the case of Braidwood FM ... it's a much smaller local area."

Mr Waters said Braidwood FM was able to provide such granular information on where the fire was, he was able to tell people the exact property it was approaching.

"Because it was down to such a local level so that if the RFS said the fire was along this highway, from the information we had we could actually say 'yes it's next door to John Smith's place'," he said.

"The dozer operators who were building containment lines were listening to us in their dozers to know how far behind them the fire was or how far in front the fire was because we were able to give that local level of knowledge.

"Likewise people in the RFS trucks out in the field on the western side of the fire were listening because they wanted to know where the fire was on the eastern side so the level of local information we were able to present was being used by people on the fireground at the time they were fighting the fire."

But while the station had been recognised as a vital resource during the fires, it was yet to receive any additional funding.

The inquiry also heard commercial broadcasters felt like they were bypassed during the bushfires by emergency services.

Stations had difficulty getting timely and accurate information from emergency service agencies, with listeners left to fill in the void through unofficial channels like social media.

Commercial Radio Australia chief executive Joan Warner took particular aim at the ACT government for issuing pamphlets that told residents to listen to the ABC's 666 radio station in Canberra during an emergency.

"Eighty-six per cent of Australians listen to commercial radio stations," she said.

There were also 226 commercial radio stations in regional and remote Australia, compared with 45 ABC stations, she said.

"We're not saying it should be us instead of them, it should be both of us," Ms Warner said.