

DEPARTMENT OF FIRE AND EMERGENCY SERVICES — COMMUNICATIONS

29. Hon COLIN de GRUSSA to the minister representing the Minister for Emergency Services:

I refer to recent reports of regional emergency services volunteers and community members being unable to communicate during emergencies due to certain factors, including telecommunication outages, a poor mobile signal and a poor Western Australian emergency radio network signal.

- (1) Have any of these incidents been raised with the Department of Fire and Emergency Services or the minister's office?
- (2) If yes to (1), will the minister please provide the details of those incidents?
- (3) What is the government doing to ensure that our regional emergency service volunteers and community members remain connected in emergency situations?

Hon STEPHEN DAWSON replied:

I thank the honourable member for some notice of the question.

- (1)–(3) Effective telecommunications are critical for efficient emergency response and the safety of responders. The Department of Fire and Emergency Services relies on service providers for the provision of a range of voice and data transmission networks, such as 3G and 4G and satellite, and together with other emergency service providers, such as St John Ambulance WA, the WA Police Force and the Department of Biodiversity, Conservation and Attractions, the provision of radio networks. DFES maintains over 180 radio repeaters providing WAERN radio coverage to urban and regional centres and large parts of the coast and rural areas.

Continuity of services will always be an ongoing concern for emergency services and for community members alike, which is why, for example, the ABC has urged the public to maintain a battery-powered radio to ensure that they continue to receive emergency information should the mobile phone networks fail. It is not considered safe to rely on a single source of information during an emergency incident.

Many factors cause communications issues, including peak demand causing network congestion, blackspots in telecommunication coverage and power failures that in turn cause communications systems to fail.

Similar to communications providers and other government agencies, DFES maintains a small fleet of mobile telecommunications equipment, such as mobile radio repeaters and satellite communications equipment, that can be mobilised onto a major incident ground should the equipment be damaged or a power disruption cause the equipment to fail, provided the equipment can be located safely and be supported. This equipment can also be used when incidents occur in areas without WAERN coverage. Our major 3G and 4G network providers and the national broadband network also maintain a small fleet of mobile communications cells that are mobilised for community use should extended communication cell outages be experienced.

DFES also has the option to utilise the Australian Defence Force through the Defence Force Assistance to the Civil Community request process to enhance radio communications. This was enacted during the Norseman Complex bushfires in January 2020.

DFES is reliant on reliable telecommunications and has in place a range of measures to mitigate risk including the provision of equipment, appropriate training, reviewing and identifying blackspots with its telecommunications providers and ensuring radio communication plans and workarounds are current.

If the honourable member has a specific question relating to an incident or area, the minister requests that he be more specific.