

NEWSLETTER #2 – DECEMBER 2010

There is no doubt that the concept has been well received and our membership continues to grow. We now have a good spread of subscribers over the entire MACS area which, in response to interest expressed, has been extended to include Wollombi and surrounds.

Again in response to interest expressed, alerts have been extended to include road closures and delays, and criminal activity as well as other potential threats in addition to severe weather, such as hail, lightning and damaging winds, bushfires and fire bans.

The service in relation to criminal activity was triggered by a spate of burglaries in the Somersby, Mangrove Mountain and Yarramalong area, with those responsible finally being apprehended by Police in Yarramalong.

Somewhat like the F3, for which the RTA is now providing better information, there are a number of roads in the Mountain area where either there is no alternative if a blockage occurs or the alternative route is a very circuitous one. Unlike the F3, however, many of the roads are not State roads under the jurisdiction of the RTA. This means that virtually no information is available unless it's a big enough story to be picked up by the media, radio and TV especially - and then it's often too late for our purposes.

Over the last year we have made contact with local emergency management groups and agencies in an attempt to set up arrangements for liaison and to assist them with local communications to MACS subscribers, but without any success to date. This also applies to approaches we have made to the higher political levels.

Without dwelling on the detail, below are some extracts from the responses we have received:

"This matter was discussed at the [emergency management committee] meeting yesterday. The [committee] members recognised that the NEWS system will be the official means of issuing warnings but were happy for [MACS] to run any system that they considered appropriate to provide information to the local community."

As you are probably aware, NEWS is now called '[Emergency Alert](#)' with direct communication to individuals by SMS and voice-to-landline phones being approved for use by Government as a result of the Victorian Bushfire Royal Commission, but only in [major life-threatening emergencies](#).

"When police attend any incident, be it a motor vehicle crash, emergency incident, search for offenders or other incident, if there is a need to advise the local community, it will be done through the Police Media Unit who will then draft a media release and place it on the NSW Police Force website at: <http://www.police.nsw.gov.au/> ...

... Overall, most people listen the local radio either at home at sometime during the day or in their vehicles when out and about. That is probably the best way to get messages across to the community. To obtain information to post on MACS, I would suggest you monitor the NSWPF website, the RTA website, RFS website, local electronic & print media."

"I make reference to your email on the above [MACS] alert system and advise systems are in place by the Rural Fire Service which provides up to date information on the RFS website, and the iPhone App, RFS Fires Near Me."

The problem is that the information published on the various websites or by other means is often not available for some considerable time after the incident occurred, is very scant or is not available at all. Not many in rural communities have an iPhone, a matter we raised with the Minister and we had understood an alternative web-based solution for use on all WAP (Internet) enabled phones was due to be released early October.

It seems to us that the NSW authorities have not yet caught up with how effective an opt-in community communication system like MACS can be in assisting them to get messages out quickly and accurately. They are still focussed on centralised hierarchically controlled communications with no delegation to the operational level and liaison with the local communities who are their customers.

Most disappointing so far is the NSW RFS, especially in view of the findings of the Victorian Bushfire Royal Commission. Ironic that the local paid officials do not appear to be prepared (or allowed?) to even talk to a volunteer based community group in a constructive way when they themselves depend so much on volunteers.

Some of you may recall that in our previous newsletter we mentioned that the Bureau of Meteorology had plans in place for a new interactive website to be rolled out in NSW, as has already been done in Victoria. When we questioned why lightning information was not being provided on their radar maps (as it was on others), they advised:

"While the Bureau [of Meteorology] has access to realtime lightning data in house (collected by an external commercial provider) we do not have permission to display the information on our website. However the data is available from other webproviders (Google 'Lightning')."

Fortunately, the [Early Warning Network](#) assists us in this regard with timely localised warnings as best they can using various sources, but we understand they also are restricted by the legislated copyright protection under which the BoM operates.

CONCLUSION

For the time being at least, we are more dependent on the contribution all of us can make by providing information to be shared with other MACS subscribers than we thought would be the case. Needless to say, the more subscribers we have the better so it is up to all of us to help spread the word.

We will continue to monitor official sources for you by subscribing to RSS Feeds and, in some cases, using 'screen scrapers' to detect changes in information posted on their websites, but you will appreciate our resources are limited. We are also investigating other methods.

Let's face it anyway, the first people to know what's happening are those that are THERE. You tell us and we can let others know. Needless to say, however, the first priority is to report the incident officially as may be appropriate.

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