



## **Optus Submission**

**To Queensland Floods Commission of Inquiry**

**4 April 2011**

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## **1. Introduction**

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- 1.1 Optus welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Queensland (QLD) Flood Commission of Inquiry ("the Commission"). The 2010/2011 devastating flooding seen in Queensland ("the floods") has highlighted the importance of communications as vital infrastructure. It has brought into focus the important role we do play in assisting the emergency services and the community during in a crisis and in the recovery phase.
- 1.2 The floods have had an impact on all Australians. Queenslanders have been besieged by some of the most horrific natural disasters in recent memory. The images on our television screens have affected the whole community and will stay with us long after the waters have receded.
- 1.3 In commenting on the destructive floods and the lessons learned from the crisis, Optus would like to take this opportunity to highlight to the Commission our response to the immediate crisis. Furthermore, Optus observes some of the difficulties during the floods and suggests some possible solutions to these.
- 1.4 Optus would like to acknowledge the incredible work carried out by the emergency services under gruelling circumstances during the floods and other disasters across Australia.
- 1.5 Optus would also like to thank the Queensland Government and Emergency Management Queensland for their swift action to ensure Optus engineers were granted priority access to impacted areas, particularly in the Lockyer Valley.
- 1.6 In addition to this, Optus notes that the Commission has made specific requests in relation to a number of areas and Optus has responded accordingly, these answers have been provided separately as requested.

## **2. Executive Summary**

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- 2.1 For Optus, connectivity is the heart of our business and so we consider it an absolute priority that we work to maintain vital communications services in the face of natural disasters. At times like the floods, communications are fundamental infrastructure and one of the key instruments in helping emergency services coordinate recovery efforts.
- 2.2 The highest attention was committed by the Optus Executive to ensure the floods were given the necessary resources. From across the business, staff were mobilised to ensure resources were dispatched appropriately and the Chief Executive Officer led twice daily briefings to focus the entire team on assisting the community and restoring vital communication services.
- 2.3 Optus' staff worked determinedly to restore this vital service to assist members of the community calling for help, calling family and friends and assisting others who were still in danger. Optus staff worked quickly to ensure base stations and transmission sites were back up and running as quickly as possible.
- 2.4 Optus has a Customer focus culture, and staff volunteered to work in the affected areas, worked extended hours, in very trying circumstances and at times putting Customer needs ahead of the needs of their own families.

- 2.5 In addition to our core business of restoring communications, like many Australians, Optus staff worked with the community during and post the floods to physically clean up houses and throw out soiled furnishings and rubbish.
- 2.6 Despite the unprecedented nature and some inherent difficulties that presented themselves in this crisis, with assistance from Emergency Management Queensland and the Local/State and Federal Governments, Optus was able to restore its services as quickly as possible. This enabled vital communications to be maintained and restored throughout the days of the flooding.
- 2.7 Optus acknowledges that not all terms of reference of the Queensland Flood Commission of Inquiry are relevant to the experiences of Optus and the telecommunications industry.
- 2.8 Optus considers other industry sectors are better placed to comment on those terms of reference relating to insurance and the operation of dams in Queensland. However, Optus welcomes the opportunity to comment more generally from our experience on the following terms of the reference;

(a) The preparation and planning by federal, state and local government; emergency services and the community for the 2010/2011 floods in Queensland.

(c) All aspects of the response to the 2010/2011 flood events, particularly measures taken to inform the community and measures to protect life and private and public property, including

- Immediate management, response and recovery
- Resourcing, overall coordination and deployment of personnel and equipment
- Adequacy of equipment and communications systems; and
- The adequacy of the communities response

(d) The measures to manage the supply of essential services such as power, water and communications during the 2010/2011 flood events.

(g) All aspects of land use planning through local and regional planning systems to minimise infrastructure and property impacts from floods.

### **3. Optus Disaster Response**

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- 3.1 Optus assisted customers and communities during the floods by undertaking the following measures:
- 3.2 **Launched Optus' Customer Assistance Package**, available to support residential and small and medium business (SMB) customers who experienced financial hardship as a result of the Queensland floods.
- *Extended payment period*: Customers experiencing financial hardship could arrange special extended payment timeframes for their Optus bill by contacting the Optus Financial Services team. In addition, in cases of extreme hardship as a result of

property destruction, Optus would consider waiving a customer's bill on a case by case basis.

- *Fees waiver:* Customers who incurred fees for late payments, service suspension or early service termination could request to have the fee waived. No reconnection fees will apply for customers who wish to reconnect their services within 12 months.
- *Free fixed-to-mobile and fixed-to-fixed call diversion:* Optus engineers worked hard to minimise impact on the Optus network in the flood affected areas. If customers experienced a disruption to their Optus fixed home phone service, Optus offered free call diversion to any mobile or fixed number of their choice.

### **3.3 Extended hours of operation for customer care from 15 January until 4 February 2011**

- Optus deployed an additional 250 employees in its call centres to help customers with queries relating to the restoration of services and general enquiries.
- Optus extended the hours of operation across its consumer, SMB, government and corporate business and wholesale customer service centres to provide assistance for the people of Queensland as they returned home or to work over the initial days and weeks post the crisis.
- Fault and technical support was also available 24/7 for residential and SMB customers.

### **3.4 Distributed pre-paid handsets with credit to people who have lost access to telecommunications services**

- To assist flood affected customers, Optus staff and franchisees gave out in excess of 1,500 pre-paid Optus mobile handsets loaded with a minimum of \$600 credit for services in the Lockyer Valley, Bundaberg, Rockhampton, Brisbane and Toowoomba, with support from the Red Cross.

### **3.5 Established portable Internet Kiosk and Customer Service Trailer to provide free communication services for the local community to keep in touch with family and friends**

- Optus made its Customer Service Trailer available to the local community to provide free voice calls via satellite phones, laptops with free wireless broadband and mobile phone chargers to keep in touch with family and friends.



Picture: Optus customer service trailer in Dalby, QLD 2011

- The Optus' "Caravan" was sent to every evacuation centre, in particular in Grantham, Toowoomba and the Lockyer Valley. These facilities continue to be moved to the most appropriate locations based on consultation with local emergency services.
- The portable trailer also contained free bottled water and a widescreen television that was used by the evacuation centres as an entertainment resource for children.
- Optus also utilised with its retail distribution network to assist in providing local communities with assistance and support.

### 3.6 **Launched Optus corporate donation and staff appeal**

- Optus donated to a number of established flood relief organisations and donated services to assist the Queensland flood disaster relief efforts.
- This included \$200,000 to the Queensland Premier's Flood Relief Appeal, in addition to the \$25,000 pledged through the Harvey Norman fundraising appeal.
- Optus also launched an internal staff appeal as part of its internal workplace giving program and will match employee donations to the Flood Relief Appeal dollar for dollar. A cheque for \$470,000 was presented to the Queensland Government which represented the contribution Optus staff made across Australia as well as a matched donation from Optus.

### 3.7 **Assisted Kids Helpline to maintain vital phone services**

- To enable the Kids Helpline head office to remain up and running after it was affected by the Brisbane flooding, Kids Helpline staff were temporarily relocated and operated out of Optus' Woolloongabba office Queensland, ensuring that vital services were maintained.

### 3.8 **Using satellite capability to assist emergency services in their rescue and recover efforts**

- Optus provided a number of satellite phones to emergency services as well as affected residents in the Mt Sylvia region of the Lockyer Valley.
- As the only Australian telecommunication provider that owns and operates its own satellite fleet, Optus used its unique capability to provide vital communication services in the worst affected areas.
- After consultation with local authorities, Optus deployed its portable satellite base stations to the Murphy's Creek evacuation centre in the Lockyer Valley which restored mobile coverage to this region for the first time since the flood situation began.



Picture: Optus portable satellite mobile base station at Murphy's Creek, QLD 2011

### 3.9 **Optus fixed and mobile network robustness during the natural disasters**

- Despite very adverse circumstances, the Optus network remained robust and performed well during the floods.
- Services were impacted largely due to power outages, and to a lesser extent, water damaged infrastructure during the floods.



Picture: A water damaged Optus mobile base station, 2011

- The disasters impacted both our mobile and our fixed networks however almost all of our services were restored very quickly to normal operations.
- Mobile services were impacted to varying levels in five main areas with over 100 individual sites affected in: Brisbane; Toowoomba; Lockyer Valley, Ipswich; and Kilcoy regions.
- Fixed home and internet services were affected in parts of Brisbane and Ipswich. In most cases disruption to services was caused by power outages to the nodes on our Hybrid Fibre Cable (HFC) network,
- As a result of the Queensland floods, a number of business customers were affected for some time afterwards, however this was mainly due to water damage, restricted access to the site and inadequate power availability from the Power Authority.

### 3.10 **Optus ensured the network remained operational**

- Our engineers worked around the clock monitoring network performance.
- Optus deployed additional resources to Queensland to keep our network operational and restore services to customers in affected areas as quickly as possible.
- Where possible, we deployed backup generators in accessible locations in Brisbane, Ipswich, Lockyer Valley and Toowoomba to allow us to respond to power outages. We flew engineers by helicopter to refuel power generators to maintain services and deployed portable satellite-powered base stations to provide mobile coverage.
- We worked closely with Emergency Management Queensland, Emergency Service organisations and energy providers to arrange access to restricted areas in order to connect power generators and provide continuity of service to fixed and mobile infrastructure.



- At a network level, we prioritised mobile network capacity in affected areas for voice calls and SMS as needed.
- Optus' Sydney to Brisbane inland transmission link experienced an optical fibre break in the Helidon area due to the severe flooding. However, all protected services were switched successfully to our coastal link, so residential and business services were not impacted.
- Optus technicians identified the fibre damage and with the help of emergency services received special access to undertake extensive repair activity to restore the link as quickly as possible.



Picture: Engineers repairing inter-city cable at Helidon, QLD 2011

### 3.11 **Optus Sponsorship of community events to raise the spirits of Queenslanders**

- Optus has sponsored a number of community events, designed to raise the spirits of Queenslanders as they get back on their feet.
- These have included:
  1. The Spirit of the Country Music Festival – Toowoomba attended by approximately 20,000 people.
  2. Red Cross Murphy Creek Event – with 1000 community attendees
  3. Free Movie Nights – Toowoomba, Rockhampton and Ipswich
  4. Bundy Concert – a family day event in Bundaberg

## **4. The preparation and planning by federal, state and local government; emergency services and the community for the 2010/2011 floods in Queensland.**

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- 4.1 Optus' submits that it is critical to include the telecommunications sector in disaster planning and preparation at a State/Local government level. Particularly in involvement with the State Government and Emergency services disaster plans and response organisations.
- 4.2 Optus believes that proper preparation, planning and engagement from State and Local Government will ensure better communication between telecommunications providers and government authorities during the critical hours during and after a disaster event.
- 4.3 This will lead to a faster restoration of services in the most crucial of areas, and will also ensure emergency services are provided with the services they require to enable them to respond as required to a crisis.
- 4.4 Whilst Optus appreciates the chaotic and unprecedented circumstances which existed during and directly after the floods, Optus found that information from Government authorities and between different organisations was difficult to obtain in that period. This made it more problematic to fully assess the extent and severity of the flooding and possibly affected Optus telecommunications infrastructure.

**5. All aspects of the response to the 2010/2011 flood events, particularly measures taken to inform the community and measures to protect life and private and public property.**

- 5.1 In relation to immediate management of the response, Optus submits that the structure and hierarchy of information dissemination from the State Government emergency management is critical. Optus was reliant to a large extent, on the media and information sourced from the internet during critical periods.
- 5.2 After becoming aware that Optus could participate in the State Disaster Management Centre meetings, an Optus representative was present at all meetings to provide updates and gather critical information.
- 5.3 Better message broadcasting directly to the telecommunications sector would enable Optus and other telecommunications providers to better provision resources to firstly better predict the likelihood of an outage, and secondly to reconfigure network elements or associated infrastructure to limit the extent of any outage.
- 5.4 This was particularly evident in relation to main power, which limited our ability to deploy generators to sites and likewise how to provision our network to cater for mains power outages and where power was to progressively be restored.
- 5.5 Optus notes that fundamental to our ability to restore services quickly is the need to ensure access is granted quickly to the affected areas. Optus understands the requirement to put in place certain road and access restrictions for safety purposes.
- 5.6 Optus submits that due to the critical nature of the services telecommunications providers provides in these times of disaster, telecommunications providers need be granted immediate priority access into areas which are provided to other Utilities.
- 5.7 Optus notes that this was granted and acknowledges the action taken by the Queensland Government. However, there was a considerable lag time which may be able to be avoided in the future with appropriate planning and preparation.

- 5.8 Optus acknowledges the importance of the media in the provision of information in times of crisis. To ensure customers and the wider community were kept informed of the status of our networks and our assistance packages, Optus issued twice daily updates to the media. Optus also pro-actively engaged with the media to give the community further information as to the status of our response.
- 5.9 In some instances, there was a generally too high reliance on media reports and second hand information to obtain appropriate and well timed information to accurately assess the requirements and therefore re-instate communications quickly.
- 5.10 In relation to equipment and resourcing, Optus procured private helicopter services and road transport to move essential network elements to areas affected by the floods. On some occasions, Optus required more sophisticated heavy moving equipment and aerial transport that were available through the Government and the Australian Defence Forces. Optus notes that delays in the resourcing of this essential equipment did impact on Optus' ability to restore services faster and more efficiently.

## **6. The measures to manage the supply of essential services such as power, water and communications during the 2010/2011 flood events.**

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- 6.1 Optus used its satellite capability to provide temporary mobile coverage at the evacuation centre in Murphy's Creek and continued to monitor closely the performance of its mobile network throughout Ipswich, Brisbane and Regional Queensland including the Lockyer Valley.
- 6.2 Optus notes that a lack of information around where power outages were occurring and might occur restricted Optus' ability to deploy generators to sites and how to provision our network to cater for mains power outages and where power was to progressively be restored.
- 6.3 Better initial information as to the essential services of power would ensure faster restoration of communications services.

## **7. All aspects of land use planning through local and regional planning systems to minimise infrastructure and property impacts from floods.**

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- 7.1 Optus selects sites for Exchanges and Fibre Access Nodes which are above the 1 in 100 year flood heights. These sites are in the major metropolitan areas, and are more readily accessible.
- 7.2 Mobile base stations and transmission hubs are also located throughout the rural areas of the state, where flood height information is less accessible and less reliable.
- 7.3 Current planning guidelines require base stations to have low visual impact. This means they can be located in more flood prone areas.
- 7.4 Optus submits that greater flood mapping data would provide better planning for the location of mobile base stations and transmission hubs.