

## CB Emergency Channels

The following was prepared using publicly available information from the Australian Communications & Media Authority (ACMA). It is intended as a guide only and should not be relied on as a substitute for legal advice in individual cases.

There are two CB (Citizens Band) bands used in Australia:

- The HF or 27 MHz band; and
- The UHF band.

The HF band is probably best known from movies such as “Smokey and the Bandit” and “Convoy,” whereas the UHF band is unique to Australia and New Zealand.

### “Licence-Free” vs the Class Licence

Although there is no need for CB users to obtain a licence in order to use the bands, the CB bands are far from being “licence-free.” A “Class Licence” is a piece of federal legislation that specifies how a particular radiocommunications service can be used, and it automatically applies to everyone who uses that equipment, whether they know it or not.

The **Radiocommunications (Citizen Band Radio Stations) Class Licence 2025** (Cth), which replaces the former class licence as of 1<sup>st</sup> October 2025, governs how CB equipment can be used. It sets out the frequencies that can be used, the power output of CB equipment, and it also designates certain channels for a specific purpose.

### Emergency Channels

Both CB bands have channels designated as emergency channels. These channels are:

- HF or 27MHz band: Channel **9** (on 23 or 40 channel sets, Ch.5 on 18 channel sets);
- UHF band: Channels **5 AND 35**. (on 40 and 80 channel sets)

UHF Channel **5** is the primary emergency channel, with **35** being a secondary channel and the input channel for all UHF emergency channel repeaters (or “range extenders” – see Fact Sheet 03: Repeaters).

The Class Licence (section 7(1)) states that a person must not operate on these channels unless the person operates the station:

- a) During an emergency or natural disaster; or
- b) For the purposes of an emergency service organisation’s response, or ability to respond, to an emergency or natural disaster.

NOTE: In this context, the Class Licence definition of an “emergency service organisation” includes “any other organisation whose sole or principal purpose involves securing the safety of persons during an emergency” (section 4).

### Penalties for misuse

The Class Licence and the Radiocommunications Act provide for heavy penalties for the misuse of the designated emergency channels. These include:

- i. For individuals:
  - a. up to **2 years prison**; or
  - b. for civil penalties, up to \$99,000 penalty notice. \*
- ii. For others (business, corporation, etc.):
  - a. up to **\$495,000** court-imposed fine. \*
- iii. If an emergency call is blocked (deliberate or accidental):
  - a. up to 5 years prison for an individual; or
  - b. up to **\$1,650,000** court-imposed fine for a business, corporation, etc. \*

\* Penalty values correct as at 7 November 2024. Due to be reviewed with CPI.

## Enforcement of allocations

The allocation of the CB emergency channels falls under Federal legislation, so they apply across the whole of Australia and its territories.

The agency that is responsible for policing these allocations is the Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA). This agency utilises advanced radio direction-finding equipment to quickly locate a station, even if the operator is not in a fixed location (or is using only portable radio equipment).

The Australian Federal Police and members of the various state and territory Police services are also able to enforce this legislation when necessary.

## Are these channels still valid?

The CB emergency channels still play a vital role in safety-of-life and property incidents, especially when landline and mobile phone networks fail during major storms, fires, etc. Even satellite phone services can fail during times of storms or thick smoke, and CB offers emergency services the unique opportunity to talk directly to the public. Services such as RFDS and rescue helicopters often use UHF CB 5 during a response to communicate with the ground, and using UHF channel 35 can block calls on a 5/35 emergency repeater system hundreds of kilometres away that you may never know exists. This could easily cost a life.

## Who owns these channels?

No one person or group own the CB emergency channels; they fall under Commonwealth jurisdiction and can be used by anyone, *provided* the use meets the use defined in the Class Licence. This includes the right to monitor or answer calls on the channels.

## More Information

More information on the CBRS Class Licence and the legally designated channels can be found at:

- ACMA CBRS class licence page: <https://www.acma.gov.au/licences/citizen-band-radio-stations-class-licence>
- ACMA Phone: **1300 850 115**