

WESTERN POWER FACILITIES IN MID WEST

Grievance

MR J.P.D. EDWARDS (Greenough) [9.55 am]: My grievance is to the Minister for Energy and involves the Dongara lime plant, which is operated by Cockburn Cement Ltd. The Dongara lime plant is approximately four kilometres south of Dongara. It employs directly 16 people. Overall, Cockburn Cement supplies about 90 per cent of the lime market in Western Australia. Lime sells for approximately \$100 to \$120 a tonne. It is a significant industry. The operation of this company in the Dongara area also has spin-offs for the local service industries. However, there is a problem with power supply, and it concerns ignition. I will quote some comments that have been made by the operations manager -

... the kiln is dependant on power to maintain the flame in to the kiln. A series of industrial fans provides the necessary airflow to maintain our kiln flame. Any fluctuation in the supply of power that results in a power flick for as little as half a second sees our flame lost instantly.

It is a gas-operated kiln, but it needs that power to operate the fans etc. It continues -

We do have an emergency generator on site to enable safe working conditions during such incidents, but these are unable to power up in time to maintain our flame. Each 1-second power dip will require our operators to reset the plant and contain as much heat as possible whilst trying to re-light the flame. Legislatively controlled safety measures rightly restrict the conditions under which a flame can be re-lit. ... A single purge will result in a significant loss of operating temperature and provide further problems for the plant.

Once re-lit, the operators must go through a strict heat-up trace to bring the plant back up to optimum operating and production levels. This process can take anywhere from 1 to 16 hours depending on various operational factors. On average, we have lost 2 hours of plant operating time for every 1-second power dip we have experienced.

After we are able to get a flame back in to our kiln, the warm-up period has averaged 4 hours. During that time we are burning significant amounts of gas, yet are unable to produce any material. The costs involved with these heat-ups are significant and unrecoverable. In January alone we suffered 16 such dips during 13 days of production. We had several others whilst the plant was in a shutdown state for routine maintenance.

These are the direct costs only. Associated plant machinery costs are also very significant as are the production problems we face. ... When as a result of the power dips, the plant is constantly brought down in temperature and then re-heated, this build-up changes in its nature causing us extraordinary problems with blockages and further downtime for the plant. Since December 1st we have had 4 out of 6 production runs halted due to blockages caused by build-up in our lines. ...

Added to all of this are the damage to computer equipment and our main control centre, which has been very costly to repair. ...

Western Power has informed me that our problems are part and parcel of being at the end of the line through which power is fed to the region.

I know that the minister is aware of that, and Western Power is trying to fix it. It continues -

This situation is unlikely to be resolved unless an upgrade of the supply station at Geraldton is undertaken.

Given that the mid west region is earmarked for some major growth in the next few years, I hope that this upgrade has already been planned or, at least, is being thought about, if not acted upon.

I refer to the situation at Kalbarri, which is at the end of the line. When a power fluctuation occurs at Kalbarri - I gather that there are many and that the power goes out fairly frequently - there are no Western Power employees in the area to fix the fault. Therefore, it is necessary to bring a Western Power employee from Geraldton, which is a four-hour round trip, to fix a fuse on a pole, which might take only 15 minutes. Local electricians in Kalbarri are prepared to take on that role and to fix those types problems. Obviously, they would need some training. I understand that Western Power is considering the matter. I am sure that process would be hastened with some support from the minister. Kalbarri is a growing town with a population of about 1 500 to 2 000 people. It is a tourist destination. A new airport has just been opened and a new airline carrier is flying there. The people of Kalbarri should expect a similar type of power supply that the minister and I enjoy in Geraldton and Perth.

Mr E.S. Ripper: Is the member suggesting that Western Power contract local electricians for simple faults?

Mr J.P.D. EDWARDS: I am. That is feasible. The minister would appreciate that it is ridiculous and uneconomic to send two people on a four-hour round trip for a 15-minute job.

Similar problems are occurring in Dongara, which does not have a local Western Power employee, although the situation there is not as critical as the situation in Kalbarri. The Western Power employees who service Dongara operate out of Geraldton. The whole electricity situation in that area is unsatisfactory and needs an overhaul. It needs to be considered in some detail. The district that is run by the Geraldton region of Western Power contains about 240 000 power poles. I understand that each pole is examined once in four years. The Government has inherited this issue, but it must address it.

MR E.S. RIPPER (Belmont - Minister for Energy) [10.01 am]: I thank the member for Greenough for raising those matters with me as the Minister for Energy. I will refer the remarks the member made in *Hansard* to Western Power for its information and comment. This morning I had a private conversation with the member about the matters he has raised and I have received some preliminary advice from Western Power. The networks section of Western Power advises me that it is aware of the problem and has been investigating the issue since January. It has reviewed the performance of the feeder line that provides power to Cockburn Cement Ltd. I am advised that it has moved the feeder onto a more secure busbar at the Geraldton substation in the past couple of weeks. I am also advised that Western Power has undertaken treatment of the line to try to secure better prevention of pole-top fires, which have been a major cause of disruption. Western Power is currently monitoring the power supply to Cockburn Cement. I understand it has devices on the line to monitor the quality of the power supply and that the quality of the power supply has shown a significant improvement in the past week. Western Power has also sent an engineer to Cockburn Cement to discuss what actions the plant could undertake to reach a better operating performance and improve its interaction with Western Power.

I appreciate how difficult this situation must have been for Cockburn Cement. The member for Greenough has advised the House that Cockburn cement suffers an average two-hour operating time loss for every one second of power loss. The member has advised me that there are losses involved in heating up the plant following the plant tripping out, which is an uneconomic operation. The member has advised me that in January the plant suffered from 16 dips in power in 13 days. Clearly that is a difficult situation for the company. I support Western Power doing what needs to be done to rectify that situation. I have given preliminary advice to the House. I will refer the member's speech in *Hansard* to Western Power. If the member agrees, I will ask Western Power to provide that further information to him.

With regard to Kalbarri, Western Power has advised me that two linesmen were employed in Kalbarri. However, one linesman was injured at work and has not been able to work since. That has left one linesman in Kalbarri, who cannot work on his own, for safety reasons. Therefore, every time a fault occurs, Western Power sends a linesman from Geraldton. Western Power does not consider it to be economically or operationally viable to maintain staff at Kalbarri because there is not enough new work or ongoing maintenance to warrant two people. Western Power believes it has successfully serviced the area from Geraldton over the past two years. Although most faults that require attention may affect Kalbarri, they occur closer to Geraldton than Kalbarri. Nevertheless, I have listened to the member, who has said that some relatively simple faults occur in Kalbarri that could be fixed by resident electricians from Kalbarri without the need for Western Power to send somebody from Geraldton. I will ask Western Power to investigate that. On the face of it, that seems like a sensible arrangement. Perhaps some of the work could be divided. The local contractor could fix those types of faults that could be repaired quickly and Western Power could take responsibility for the more serious faults.

I cannot give the member the definitive answers he is seeking on both those issues. However, I give him a commitment that Western Power will seriously investigate the issues that he has raised, and I will support Western Power in doing that.

The SPEAKER: Grievances noted.