



Hon Bill Johnston MLA
Minister for Mines and Petroleum; Energy; Corrective Services;
Industrial Relations

Our ref: 71-23414

Hon Martin Aldridge MLC
Member for the Agricultural Region

Email: martin.aldridge@mp.wa.gov.au

Dear Mr Aldridge

Thank you for your email of 24 January 2022 on regarding power outage and restoration practices in periods of high heat and bushfire risk.

With respect to the specific outages in the Gingin area, I am advised that the same 1,057 customers were affected by outages caused by two separate faults – the first at around 2am on 19 January 2022, and the second around 8:30 pm on 21 January 2022.

Despite extensive patrols of the lines on both occasions, Western Power was unable to definitively determine the causes of these – finding evidence of a possible bird strike with the line on 19 January, and wind-borne debris on lines on 21 January. Western Power has asked me to apologise to customers that it was unable to restore supply more quickly, and I also extend my apologies.

I note your specific concerns regarding the current rate of the Extended Outage Payment Scheme (EOPS), the loss of telecommunications experienced during outages, and Western Power's restoration protocols when Total Fire Bans (TFBs) are in place. I will endeavour to respond to each of these in turn.

As you know, the McGowan Government doubled the EOPS payment rate from \$80 to \$160 for the period of 24 to 28 December 2021. Except for specified circumstances such as these, the \$80 rate has not been increased since its introduction in 2005. I recognise that this is not in line with the expectations of the community and, prior to the Christmas outages, I requested an investigation into increasing the payment permanently. It should be noted, however, that the EOPS is not intended as compensation, but rather an acknowledgement of the impacts of long outages.

I share your concerns regarding telecommunications loss during outages, particularly when bushfire risk is present. I have previously written to the Federal Minister for Telecommunications regarding this, and was also pleased to formally open a standalone power system for a remote Telstra tower near Esperance in early February, which has been provided by the State Government, through Horizon Power. I hope that this project will prompt greater Federal attention to Western Australia's telecommunications needs, by demonstrating the benefits of these systems.

Standalone power systems for telecommunications infrastructure would also provide additional safety benefits during bushfires and other natural disasters, since they remove reliance on spans of poles and wires. No matter the preventative work undertaken by Western Power, power outages are almost inevitable when natural disasters occur, as the network is also vulnerable to damage – and, where the network remains on, outages can be required to make it safe for emergency services to work in affected zones.

Finally, I appreciate your perspective with respect to Western Power's restoration practices during TFBs – particularly in light of the impacts of climate change, which we are already experiencing.

I am advised that, under the exemptions granted to it under current TFB guidelines, Western Power is permitted, with certain conditions, to carry out fault work - such as carrying out patrols to determine defects or hazards and make safe or clear faults. This is the type of activity witnessed on Brand Highway, Muchea. However, the work you witnessed may not have been permitted if a vehicle movement ban (VMB) has been declared by the relevant local government. A VMB was not a factor in these cases.

Western Power will also seek to restore power where possible, within TFB conditions. In these instances, to minimise the risk of causing a bushfire, crews isolate sections to check for fault causes and any other risks, and re-energise checked sections. However, if in a particularly at risk area, firefighting resources must be present. Western Power has dedicated water trucks, water trailers and trained personnel for this purpose, however even with this resources on hand, restorations can still only be done in staggered sections – to ensure the ignition risk area is limited.

Given these community safety protocols, it is advisable that customers take steps to prepare for an outage during bushfire season. To help your constituents for a power outage during bushfire season, Western Power has developed a short checklist which is included in the brochure found attached or at www.westernpower.com.au/safety/bushfire-safety.

I support Western Power's approach of balancing the impact of outages against the significant public safety risk from a catastrophic fire. Beyond the immediate safety risk, the emotional and financial impacts of catastrophic fires can be significant and long lasting. Nevertheless, I am committed to ensuring Western Power continuously improves as an organisation, and implements the most appropriate evidence-based practices in its operations.

I can confirm that Western Power's fault and restoration practices during TFBs, and its communication and engagement practices with its stakeholders, will be considered by the **Independent Review of the Christmas Power Outages**. This work is being led by Ms Michelle Shepherd, a Commissioner of the Australian Energy Market Commission with extensive experience in energy regulation, competition compliance and economics, and I look forward to reading her report.

Thank you for bringing these matters to my attention and I trust that this information is of assistance to you.

Yours sincerely



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