

TOPIC: POWER RESTORATION DURING FIRE SEASON

ISSUE SUMMARY:

Regional areas are suffering from lengthier power outages during fire season as utility providers generally seek to avoid working during Total Fire Bans (TFBs) or periods of high fire danger, despite there being legislative exemptions available to them. Whilst the need to perform work safely is certainly important, the impact on regional residents and businesses is significant, particularly for more vulnerable residents who may not have access to generators. Utility providers – potentially in partnership with local governments or bush fire brigades – could provide greater fire suppression equipment when restoring power during such times to reduce the risk and allow for shorter outages.

KEY POINTS:

- Extended power outages for regional communities have multiple impacts
 - They also result in telecommunications outages
 - A loss of power and telecommunications makes it virtually impossible for businesses to operate
 - They disproportionately impact vulnerable members of the community, who are less likely to have their own generators
- Whilst exemptions exist for Western Power to restore services during periods of TFB and high fire danger, these conditions are anecdotally often used as reasons why power restoration cannot or does not occur
 - The reasoning for this is not entirely clear and contact is being made with Western Power to gain a clearer understanding; presumably there are risk/health and safety considerations
- Assets exist in rural communities (Shire and volunteer Bush Fire Brigade equipment) which could be potentially made available to support power restoration activities during times of high fire danger

BACKGROUND:

In response to item 11.3.1 Exemption for Western Power to Attend to Power Outages During Total Fire Bans and Harvest Vehicle Movement Bans at the WALGA Northern Country Zone's 28 April 2020 meeting, the following information was provided:

Existing Exemptions:

Total Fire Bans

Western Power has a conditional exemption under the Bush Fires Act 1954 (Section 22C) to continue planned and unplanned tasks during a TFB. The exemption applies to Western Power employees and contractors. This provides Western Power with the capacity to undertake planned and unplanned work on a TFB day as long as they follow the conditions in their exemption.

When the forecast fire danger rating (FDR) is issued as catastrophic, then all planned work must cease. Unplanned work may continue as long as the conditions in their exemption is being met. For unidentifiable faults regarding instalment of power, it is only to be undertaken on a falling and not before the FDI falls below 32. In an emergency, DFES may request the reinstalment of power by the network operator.

Total Fire Ban Days when the Fire Danger Rating Reaches Catastrophic

Bush Fires Regulations 1954 allow for certain prescribed activities to be undertaken on a total fire ban day, by essential service providers when the fire danger rating reaches catastrophic. Prescribed urgent works activities include hot works, road works and off-road activity (as defined within the regulations).

These activities can be undertaken by essential service providers, as long as all prescribed conditions, including notification are complied with. Essential service is defined as:

essential service means any of the following -

- a) water supply, sewerage or drainage services;
- b) electricity or gas services;
- c) telecommunications services;
- d) public transport services;

Urgent works is defined as: works, in relation to infrastructure used in the provision of an essential service, means repairs or maintenance necessary for the continued provision, or restoration, of the service

Harvest and Vehicle Movement Bans (HVMBs)

A HVMB declared does not stop the provision of essential services being carried out. Regulation 24ZH(3) allows for off-road activity (as defined within the regulations) to continue if carried out as part of urgent works on infrastructure used in the provision of an essential service.

Recent Reports:

The Independent Review of Christmas 2021 Power Outages Final Report found that:

- "The extended outages (for example those longer than 12 hours) were largely due to the higher fire risk conditions. Western Power takes additional actions during these conditions to prevent its network starting a fire."
- "The restoration of power on days of higher fire risk needs to be managed in a way that minimises the risk of starting a fire. However, the procedures to restore power on higher fire risk days often delay restoration of power to customers."
- "Western Power's fire risk management procedures include the requirement to inspect the power line to identify the cause of the fault before the line can be reenergised on higher fire risk days. The activities under these procedures can add many hours to the power restoration process."
- "Western Power's approach to fire risk should be considered in the context of Western Power providing an essential service and reconnecting customers without power is a priority."
- "The Western Power DFES TFB exemption does allow DFES to request re-instatement of power in an emergency however this appears to be rarely used and there are no documented procedures on how to apply that request."

Recommendation 4 of the Review calls for "Western Power to work with key stakeholders such as the Department of Fire and Emergency Services and Local Government Authorities, to review Western Power's fire risk management approach with regard to the restoration of electricity supply on higher fire risk days."

Full report: <https://www.wa.gov.au/system/files/2022-03/Independent-Review-Christmas-2021-power-outages-Report-Final.pdf>

OPPORTUNITIES AND PROPOSED ACTIONS:

- ◆ Implementation of Recommendation 4 of the abovementioned Report, enabling Local Governments and communities to better understand constraints to power restoration, and to potentially assist to address fire risks
 - The Shire of Mingenew would welcome the opportunity to engage in this process
- ◆ Local Governments and Bush Fire Brigades have access to firefighting equipment that could be deployed to support Western Power to restore services during times of high fire danger
- ◆ The development of some form of MOU to support such partnerships would potentially enable more service restoration activities during high fire danger periods, reducing the impact on regional communities
- ◆ The Department of Fire and Emergency Services is progressing the review of current emergency services Acts (the Fire Brigades Act 1942, the Bush Fires Act 1954 and the Fire and Emergency Services Act of 1998) to create a single comprehensive Consolidated Emergency Services (CES) Act
 - This process could provide greater clarity and/or flexibility to assist with swifter restoration of electricity services during periods of elevated fire danger

DESIRED OUTCOMES:

- ◆ Implementation of Recommendation 4 of The Independent Review of Christmas 2021 Power Outages Final Report
- ◆ More utilisation of exemptions to restore power services during periods of high fire danger (safely supported by appropriate fire control equipment)
- ◆ An improved Consolidated Emergency Services Act which allows for swifter restoration of power during periods of elevated fire danger
- ◆ Fewer and shorter power outages during periods of high fire danger

Our desired longer-term outcomes are:

- ◆ Increased resilience in the electricity network to fundamentally reduce the frequency of outages

CONTACT:

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