

McGOWAN GOVERNMENT — ENERGY PERFORMANCE

700. Dr D.J. HONEY to the Minister for Energy:

I refer the minister to the recommendations of the *Independent review of Christmas 2021 power outages* report, concerning the unnecessarily delays in repairing faults and restoring power supply on days of high fire danger.

- (1) Who was the independent expert appointed by the minister, as mentioned by the minister in Parliament?
- (2) Has this person completed the work; and, if so, was a report prepared; and, if there was a report prepared, will the minister table it?
- (3) What changes are proposed to ensure a quicker restoration of power for communities experiencing a blackout?

Mr W.J. JOHNSTON replied:

I am just trying to find the name of the independent organisation that was appointed. I am sorry; I do not have that name in front of me. I do not know why.

- (1)–(3) It was a professional organisation that works in the bushfire management area. It has completed its work. Western Power engaged with the Department of Fire and Emergency Services and the Western Australian Local Government Association to go through the processes that are used for restoring power during high bushfire danger areas. We have to understand that this is a really critical issue because the challenge is that if there is an outage on a line through an area of bush and we re-energise the line but the disruption of the line is continual—it is not just transitory—we can actually start a fire. Therefore, it is absolutely incumbent—I know that everybody in this chamber agrees—that Western Power not start bushfires. Can members imagine what would occur if we had a bushfire created by electrical infrastructure on a day of high bushfire danger?

One of the challenges that has been highlighted by this process is that sometimes DFES asks Western Power to apply the high bushfire danger processes because DFES is dealing with existing bushfires. DFES actually asks Western Power to delay the re-energising of lines not because of the specific bushfire risk in that location, but because the resources and the volunteers have already been allocated to active bushfires. Therefore, there are no simple solutions for the management of electrical infrastructure.

We do not take the approach that is used in other parts of the world that have high bushfire risk—for example, in California where the entire network in the high bushfire area was switched off for three weeks this summer. The approach used in other parts of the world is to have no electricity supply at times of high bushfire risk. We do not do that in Western Australia. I am pleased that Western Power, DFES and WALGA have been working through these issues. There is still some more work to be completed. They are changing their practices and that was one of the commitments that has been made.

Another advance that has come out of the report by Michelle Shepherd is that Western Power was told to upgrade its communications. It has written to all regional councils in the south west interconnected system and asked for a single point of contact. That way, when there is an outage in any location in the south west interconnected system, Western Power can communicate directly with the person chosen by the council so that the information about the circumstances of that particular outage can be better understood. One of the problems that we had, which was highlighted in Michelle Shepherd's report, was that often the challenge was not in Western Power's control; for example, the overwhelming majority of the outages at Christmas time were actually about external impacts on the network, not the network infrastructure itself. This is going to be a significant advance so that people can understand what is needed.

Also, this year Western Power has been implementing 37 engineering projects to make sure that the resilience of the network is improved. Again, one of the challenges that was highlighted in Michelle Shepherd's report is the question of planning criteria. Some people think that when they talk about planning criteria, it means that on 15 December they will talk about what they are going to do on 25 December—that is not the case. Planning criteria is about in this year saying what you are going to do in 2025. Therefore, what Michelle Shepherd asked Western Power to do, which it has done, is review its planning criteria. The good news here is that because of this government's investment into advanced metering infrastructure, Western Power now has a much granular understanding of how the distribution network operates. Previously, there was only the monitoring of the transmission and high-voltage system and not of the low-voltage system, but because of this government's investment, we now have a much clearer understanding of what is happening on individual feeders. We are able to have a much better, more granular, planning process, and that has been a good outcome. These are all methodologies that Western Power is using, following on from the Shepherd inquiry, that will improve the service now.

I often get asked by journalists: can I guarantee that there will not be outages? There can be no guarantee. You cannot have a 100 per cent reliable electricity system. There is no possibility of that ever occurring.

We have a system that is 99.91 per cent reliable, and that is extraordinary. Of course, that is the average, and there will be different experiences on individual feeders. Again, we are trying to provide better reporting to people so they can have an understanding of the performance at that lower level. In the past, the problem was that because Western Power was being rewarded on the basis of averages, it encouraged Western Power to work in larger communities rather than smaller communities. But by working on these details, feeder by feeder, it means that the individual experiences that people have will improve over time because we will be able to respond to individual outages rather than on the averages.