

Proposed written questions for witnesses in lieu of appearing at a hearing for the inquiry into the electricity outages affecting Far West NSW in October 2024

1. Can you provide an overview of the NSW Reconstruction Authority's roles and responsibilities as it relates to the electricity outages emergencies generally, and to the Far West outages last year?

- a. When did the Authority begin recovery efforts?
- b. How did the Authority get notified or know when to begin recovery efforts?

The NSW Reconstruction Authority Act 2022 (the Act) establishes the NSW Reconstruction Authority (RA) to facilitate community resilience to the impact of disasters in NSW through:

- *facilitating the protection, recovery and reconstruction of affected communities;*
- *mitigating against the potential impact of disasters on communities; and*
- *improving the resilience and adaptability of affected communities in relation to potential disasters.*

Disasters are defined in the Act at s.6 as:

- (a) *natural disasters including bushfires, coastal hazards, cyclones, earthquakes, floods, heatwaves, landslides, severe thunderstorms, tornadoes and tsunamis)*

Depending on the nature of the disaster, one of the impacts that causes disruption to communities can be power outages.

This was the case with the Far West power outage. The severe weather event that moved through the Region on 17 October 2024 caused the destruction of 7 electricity transmission towers. As a result, the region experienced widespread, intermittent power outages that continued over several weeks. Over 12,000 properties were affected and all customers experienced three main outages, while customers in communities outside Broken Hill experienced an additional 8 outages.

The RA participated in the briefing of functional areas and other relevant agencies convened by the State Emergency Operations Controller (SEOCON) on 17 October 2024, at which it was confirmed that the Energy and Utilities Functional Area (EUSFA), led by the Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water (DECCEW), would be the Incident Controller for the response phase.

The RA worked with the Incident Controller, local government representatives and others on the ground to collate impact data and evidence in support of a Natural Disaster Declaration. This was made by the Minister for Emergency Services on 20 October 2024, enabling the activation of Disaster Recovery Funding Arrangements (DRFA) and support for immediate assistance measures under DRFA cost sharing arrangements with the Federal Government.

The RA participated in the daily standup coordination meetings convened by the SEOCON and involving the Region Emergency Operations Controller (REOCON), functional areas, other agencies and relevant parties. This was an opportunity to assess community impacts, understand needs and commence the planning of recovery efforts.

This identified a range of community impacts and needs including:

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- *Spoilage of food and other perishable items, and financial hardship due to replacement costs*
- *additional fuel costs through use of generators and other actions to get by*
- *high weather temperatures and concerns for vulnerable population groups, including*
- *remote communities, people with disabilities or chronic health conditions and those with mobility challenges*
- *rising stress and anxiety as a result of the prolonged nature of the outage and associated uncertainty*
- *economic impacts as a result of temporary business closures, and reduced tourism and retail trade*

The transition from response to recovery was agreed between the Incident Controller and the SERCON and occurred on Monday 4 November 2024, once it was confirmed that all properties were returned to the main electricity system and it was stable.

The SERCON appointed a recovery Coordinator to coordinate recovery.

However, the unique nature of the event and the time required to build temporary transmission towers meant that recovery efforts were underway simultaneously with the response phase.

2. Was the Authority involved in any Local or Regional Emergency Management Committees? How did the Authority work with or through the Local or Regional Emergency Management Committees?

- *The RA routinely attends Regional and Local Emergency Management Committee (LEMC) meetings and Emergency Operations Centres (EOCs) when stood up.*
- *The RA participated in meetings of the joint Broken Hill and Central Darling LEMC and the Western Regional EOC as the situation escalated, commencing the week of 21 October 2024. This was the opportunity to gather impact data to inform the initial recovery needs assessment for the community; and to share information and coordinate recovery efforts with functional areas.*

The RA is now a standing member of LEMCs which was endorsed by the State Emergency Management Committee.

3. What recovery work was overseen or led by the Authority to the Far West electricity outages?

The RA's multi-pronged approach to meet community needs, provide support and facilitate recovery included:

- *A Recovery Coordinator for the incident was appointed by the RA who chaired the Regional Recovery Committee which convened from 5 November 2024. The Regional Recovery Committee brought together council representatives, functional areas, and other government agencies to share information, coordinate recovery efforts and monitor progress against the Recovery Action Plan.*
- *Establishment of a Recovery Assistance Point (RAP) in Broken Hill from 29 October to 22 November 2024 - providing a one-stop shop from which more than 4,700 people who accessed recovery support and advice via partner agencies including: Service NSW; Services Australia; NSW Health (Rural Adversity and Mental Health Project);, Legal Aid;*

St Vincent De Paul Society; Royal Flying Doctor Service; Australian Red Cross; Catholic Care; and the Insurance Council of Australia.

- *From 29 October to 22 November 2024, coordinating the delivery of outreach services to Wilcannia, Menindee, White Cliffs and Tibooburra, along with Broken Hill communities with limited transport options, to support more than 870 people in these outlying areas, including Aboriginal communities.*
- *The above activities enabled the provision of the following immediate relief measures:*
 - *Collaboration with St Vincent de Paul NSW to provide 2,419 grocery vouchers and 1,920 fuel vouchers with close to 5,000 people estimated to have benefited.*
 - *Collaboration with NSW/ACT Foodbank to provide approximately 2,000 non-perishable food hampers and 5 pallets of water to community members in need, with additional partner agencies (including Salvation Army, Maari Maa, Mission Australia and SES) providing advice and assistance to distribute to households.*

a. Why was it decided that food hampers would be delivered rather than, for example, delivering vouchers for food or other credits?

- *As described above, a multi-pronged approach was used to address recovery needs which included access to a range of support, including both food hampers and grocery/fuel vouchers.*

b. We heard from Service NSW that the grant funding being offered to support affected residents was a decision by the Authority.

i. How did the Authority decide to offer these grants?

The NSW Premiers Department are the policy owners of this program.

ii. Which agency decided the eligibility requirements for these grants?

The NSW Premiers Department are the policy owners of this program.

c. Have you seen many applications for relief funding through the Joint Disaster Recovery Funding Arrangements, under the Natural Disaster Declaration for the outages emergency?

Applications for relief funding are managed through a variety of administering agencies, including Transport for NSW, NSW Public Works and NSW Combat Agencies. The RA does not have current visibility of the number of applications, but does have visibility over the total funding that has been claimed.

The RA can advise that as of 31 January 2025, claims under the Disaster Recovery Funding Arrangements 2018, have been made for Emergency Works (emergency food, clothing and temporary accommodation) and counter disaster operations for the protection of the public.

Claims are also expected in relation to the delivery of RAPs and community outreach efforts.

One application was received for the Disaster Relief Grant program. However, it was subsequently closed due to no response from the applicant to a request for additional information.

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4. The NSW Government submission refers to the establishment of a Recovery Assistance Point (RAP) in Broken Hill, and the Mobile Service Centres (MSCs) to the outlying communities like Menindee, Tibooburra, White Cliffs and Wilcannia.

a. How did you decide where to set up Recovery Assistance Point? Why was Broken Hill the only site of a RAP?

- *A Recovery Assistant Point (RAP) was established in Broken Hill due to having the largest population of impacted people.*
- *Broken Hill was established as the base to deliver a hub and spoke model of recovery to outlying communities. The Broken Hill RAP housed partner agencies such as ServiceNSW, Red Cross, Catholic Care, Vinnies and Royal Flying Doctor Service. It also supported Mobile Recovery Outreach to outlying communities.*

b. When were the MSCs deployed to the outlying communities?

To be answered by Service NSW

c. Where were these MSCs?

To be answered by Service NSW

(Tibooburra, Packsaddle, Menindee, White Cliffs, and Wilcannia)

d. What services were available at these RAPs and MSCs? Which organisations and agencies did you work with to set up these assistance centres?

- *The Broken Hill RAP housed partner agencies such as ServiceNSW, Red Cross, Catholic Care, Vinnies and Royal Flying Doctor Service. It also supported Mobile Recovery Outreach to outlying communities.*
- *To be answered by Service NSW*

Whilst the RA did not arrange or facilitate MSCs, the RA did undertake mobile outreach across a number of locations across the Far West region. Where possible, the RA did partner with Service NSW to ensure that Mobile Outreach occurred concurrently, in the same locations as the MSCs in order to provide more holistic support and service to those communities.

5. How did the Authority communicate or inform the community of the assistance that was available to them?

The RA used a range of traditional and digital channels to promote recovery support in the Far West including:

- *Flyers (17) advertising the support available and opening hours of the RAPs and mobile outreach services were provided to local businesses, services, City of Broken Hill and Central Darling Shire Council for display*
- *Signage displayed in Broken Hill and outreach locations advertising support available*
- *Participation in daily media conferences and regular (10) radio interviews on ABC Broken Hill to update the community*
- *Frequent Social media posts reaching approx. 38,000 people with the use of tagging City Broken Hill, Central Darling Shire and ABC Broken Hill to broaden exposure*

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- *Provided personalised assistance through RA social media channels for Broken Hill residents who were unable to attend a RAP and connected with support and services*
 - *Regular Facebook stories sharing information and updates Regular contact and collateral provided to City of Broken Hill and Central Darling Council to share with their communities*
 - *EDM to local services and stakeholders to share recovery information with their networks*
 - *Participation in cross agency media releases*
 - *RA website highlighted support available and links to Department of Energy Power Outage page*
- a. Was there outreach support offered to the community?
Please refer to the above