

**Submission
No 4**

THE ELECTRICITY OUTAGES AFFECTING FAR WEST NSW IN OCTOBER 2024

Organisation: Central Darling Shire Council

Date Received: 21 January 2025

CENTRAL DARLING SHIRE COUNCIL

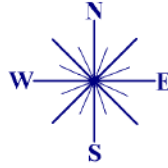
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CORRESPONDENCE TO:

THE GENERAL MANAGER

COUNCIL CHAMBERS

P. O. BOX 165

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Invitation to make a submission

Inquiry into electricity outages affecting Far West NSW in October 2024

Council Background:

Central Darling Shire Council (CDSC) is the largest local government area in New South Wales, encompassing 53,511 square kilometers. Despite its vast size, the shire has a small and gradually declining population of fewer than 2,000 residents. Notably, 48% of the population identifies as Indigenous, with the majority residing in Wilcannia, Menindee, and Ivanhoe. The shire faces economic challenges due to low household income, the extensive geographical area that needs to be managed by the Council, and the duplication of assets required to service multiple smaller communities.

In the financial year 2023/24, CDSC's total income for continuing operations was \$45.7 million. The Council received \$2.4 million from rates and annual charges, with the majority of its income coming from grants. Central Darling Shire Council is not in a position, based on the current revenue model collected from users, to operate and maintain services independently. Historically, capital improvements to infrastructure assets have been funded by other levels of government due to the Council's limited ability to generate revenue.

Initial Response to the power outages:

On Thursday, 17 October 2024, the Far West of NSW, including most of the Central Darling Shire Council (CDSC) area, experienced a power outage. The outage affected the towns of Menindee, Wilcannia, White Cliffs, and all rural properties connected by the transmission power lines. Mid-morning, Council became aware via social media of a significant power issue due to storm damage to the transmission line into the Far West of NSW.

At 3 pm on the same day, the Central Darling Local Emergency Management Committee (LEMC) convened to establish actions to address the power outage. To optimise resources,

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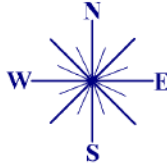
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Broken Hill and the unincorporated areas were incorporated into the CDSC LEMC during the response, with daily meetings continuing over the subsequent weekend and weeks. During a three-week period, there were three major power outages lasting between 20 to 30 hours each, along with smaller interruptions lasting up to several hours.

Council operations were significantly impacted by the power outages, notably affecting water supply and sewage disposal in Wilcannia. Large generators were hired to maintain these services. Council established recovery centres in Menindee, Wilcannia, and White Cliffs for the community to recharge mobile phones and escape the heat. Additionally, Council assisted local businesses in setting up generators to continue operating and supplying food, medicine, and fuel to communities. Arrangements were made for refrigeration at council and private facilities for residents to store perishable food. Council also supported government and NGO agencies with necessary resources and information.

Issues observed:

During the extended power outages, residents faced significant challenges, particularly in managing food storage and preparation due to either no notice or very little notice provided of the outages. Many residents lost refrigerated and frozen food as a result. Communication about the outages was difficult throughout the shire, primarily due to the limited media presence. Information dissemination relied heavily on social media by the Council and government agencies, with residents sharing updates with family and friends.

While the power outages affected the Council's sewage operations, they did not impact Wilcannia residents' sewage discharge from effluent tanks contained within properties. However, if the power outage had continued for a longer period, it could have led to a major health issue. Telecommunication, mobile phone coverage, and internet services were severely disrupted, with mobile phone towers' battery backup lasting only several hours during the outages.

Handout of food hampers:

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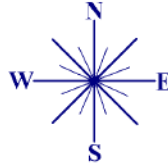
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The State government's rollout of food hampers was not supported by the Council. The Council believes that an alternative short-term solution could have been implemented by utilising local supermarkets or businesses instead of distributing food hampers. During the crisis, all supermarkets and general stores had generator power and were well-stocked. Residents who lost their food supplies due to power outages could have restocked at their nearest provider if suitable arrangements had been made. In the townships of Wilcannia and Menindee, where 50% to 75% of the population are Indigenous and considered low-income earners, appropriate booking arrangements could have been established for those residents to replenish their food supplies. This approach would have provided an economic boost for local businesses in our communities.

The distribution of food hampers was logistically and labour-intensive for government agencies, NGOs, and Council staff. Initially, it was expected that volunteer emergency services would assist with the distribution; however, the shire has a limited number of emergency service volunteers, so the responsibility fell to government agencies and NGOs. Consequently, the majority of residents received a hamper, regardless of their need. In some instances, individuals took more hampers than necessary or did not experience a loss of food during the power outages.

In summary, the distribution of food hampers could have been avoided if a localised business approach had been adopted, targeting only those residents affected by the power outages and who were on low incomes or vulnerable.

Government Aboriginal Agencies:

While all state and federal Aboriginal agencies collaborated well with other agencies during the power outage crisis, it became evident that these agencies are short-staffed and lack the necessary delegated authority or autonomy to implement substantial actions during a crisis. Typically, government Aboriginal agencies act as advocates for Aboriginal people; however, it is essential for these agencies to diversify their roles within our communities. Agency staff, who are mostly from local or regional communities, possess first-hand local

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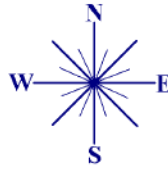
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intelligence and experience of Aboriginal people and their families, and often know who is most vulnerable in a crisis, such as during a power outage.

The previously mentioned rollout of food hampers could have been avoided if government Aboriginal agencies had the delegated authority to set up accounts at local supermarkets and issue coupons (up to \$100 per family) to restock lost food for the most vulnerable Aboriginal people as an urgent response. While Centrelink payments were available for those on benefits, these did not arrive until several weeks into the power outage crisis. This approach may eliminate the need for the distribution of food hampers, thereby saving resources and expenses for the government.

Telstra- Mobile phone communications:

During the power outage crisis, landline and NBN services remained operational. However, most residents rely on mobile phones and internet services as their primary means of communication. Telstra is the sole telecommunications provider in the shire. Mobile phone coverage was disrupted, primarily due to the lack of battery backup and generator provisions at mobile phone towers. Without mobile phone coverage and internet access, communicating became nearly impossible for our residents unless they had personal power generators, or accessed public Wi-Fi at Council, NGO facilities, or businesses.

Telstra's response to the initial power outage was slow, taking up to 24 hours to supply generators to some mobile phone tower sites, often just before power resumed. After power was restored post-outage, Telstra began removing the generators from the towers. Within 36 hours, another significant power outage occurred, necessitating the reinstatement of generators. The White Cliffs community, with its predominantly elderly population living underground in "Dugouts," was particularly vulnerable.

In response to the last major power outage, some White Cliffs community members considered installing their own generator at the Telstra mobile phone tower. However, a Telstra technician arrived with a generator just as they were about to proceed.

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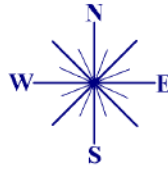
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Following the crisis, the Council engaged in discussions with Telstra regarding the management of backup power supply for White Cliffs. Although a permanent generator and fuel pod are located at the White Cliffs mobile phone tower, Telstra has decommissioned the generator due to its age and has no plans to replace it. Telstra would permit the Council to manage the backup power supply if staff were trained, and the Council purchased a new generator (valued at \$30k) for the site. This cost is prohibitive for the Council, which is now seeking State Government financial assistance to secure a reliable mobile phone service for White Cliffs.

Natural Disaster Declaration:

During the six-week power outage crisis, the Council incurred costs amounting to \$150,000. This includes \$110,000 for creditors (generator hire, fuel, electrical services) and \$40,000 for staff wages (coordination and management activities). The Council is seeking full reimbursement of these incurred costs, as the response to the power outage crisis was beyond the Council's control and ordinary operational activities. The financial situation of the Council relies heavily on funding revenue, with minimal revenue derived from rates and charges to support its operations. The Council area is covered by a Natural Disaster Declaration (AGRN-1149) due to the power outage; however, it has yet to be clarified whether the Council can submit a claim, the process for doing so, and the specifics of what can be claimed.

Future preparedness for power outages

As previously mentioned, mobile phone and internet connectivity is essential, particularly in rural and remote local government areas such as Central Darling, which covers a large expanse of land. An interim short-term solution to ensure mobile phone connectivity during power outages is the deployment of a portable generator at White Cliffs. This would incur minimal expense (\$30k) to the State Government and provide community security during power outage emergencies.

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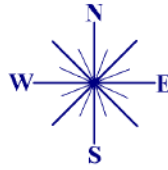
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TransGrid and Essential Energy needs improve their emergency management and contingency plans to respond more effectively to power outages, including conducting regular tests and maintenance of backup power supplies.

Moreover, the implementation of renewable energy solutions, such as solar power with battery backup, for the townships of Menindee, Ivanhoe, Wilcannia, and White Cliffs is crucial to ensuring consistent and reliable power supply to these communities. While frequent power outages are not uncommon in the Central Darling local government area during storm events, it is imperative that communities within the shire have access to a more reliable power supply. This would help safeguard the wellbeing and safety of the community, preventing any risks associated with power disruptions.