

**Submission  
No 18**

## **THE ELECTRICITY OUTAGES AFFECTING FAR WEST NSW IN OCTOBER 2024**

**Organisation:** Menindee Headquarters Brigade, NSW RFS

**Date Received:** 7 February 2025



## NSW RURAL FIRE SERVICE

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The NSW RFS Menindee HQ Brigade is one of the peak emergency service providers in Menindee and is staffed wholly by volunteers locally. The entire Menindee population, surrounding villages and properties were impacted by the power outage caused when the main transmission line from Buronga to Broken Hill was brought down by severe weather on the night of 16<sup>th</sup> of October 2024.

Storm damage to the 220KV transmission line supplying power to Menindee and far west NSW on 16<sup>th</sup> of October 2024 and subsequent blackouts on account of existing and new problems with the ageing backup power generators, coupled with the inability to use power from the 53MW Broken Hill Solar Plant and 199MW Silverton Wind Farm and initial unavailability of AGL's 50MW Battery Energy Storage System has unequivocally demonstrated that the region's electricity security falls short of community expectations.

Furthermore, it is unlikely that AGL's 50MW battery and Hydrostor's proposed 200MW Silver City Energy Storage Centre (with one hour and eight hours reserve respectively if fully charged, as referenced online by RenewEconomy [here](#)) will have the capability to fully power Broken Hill and far west NSW without supply interruptions in the event of extended disconnections from the national electricity grid.

One very serious consequence of the outage was that all telephone communications including '000' calls failed as Telstra phone towers used available back up battery power then went offline. The Menindee tower went offline as soon as two hours after losing power and stayed offline until a third backup generator was provided by Telstra. In some instances, generators were installed then retrieved then reinstalled at Telstra towers as the gravity of the situation became clearer. This heavily impacted on our ability co-ordinate an emergency response capability including all emergency services in Menindee and surrounds. It was again identified that Police, Ambulance vehicles and Menindee Health Service staff did not have and still do not have access to UHF radio communications both handheld and vehicle mounted.

The issues with Telstra switching off the 3G network has further exacerbated the ability of emergency services and the community being able to have adequate open communication lines during the power outage. There is and has not been a paid role in Menindee for a person to coordinate emergency services. This was clearly demonstrated during the 2018/19 fish kills and again during the 2022/23 floods.

The Office of the Chief Scientist and Engineer report from 2023 fish kills identified that communications between agencies and communities was a major hurdle in clear and timely flow information to the community. The lack communication systems with the public added stress to what was already a trying experience. Given that remote area communications had

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failed along with both internet and mobile coverage, the main information feed was via the public broadcaster ABC radio if you had the ability to tune in.

An ongoing concern for the community is that since the major outage, Menindee has experienced minor power outages which have subsequently caused significant stress and concerns to the community as to how long and cause of any outage. Given the lack of effective communication lines/plans, it was a matter of 'wait and see what happens next'.

There were no clearly identified locations where community could go and get the latest accurate information from a reliable source. Text messages were being sent out by Essential Energy during the October outages, however, with no phone service these messages didn't come through until power was restored.

Food hampers were made available for community members during the power outage from a volunteer organisation Country Women's Association, the RFS was asked to deliver the hampers to homes in Menindee. This process was problematic, with incorrect addresses being provided; a more viable solution would be to nominate a specific point of contact in town where can go and collect a hamper.

A much better system would be to implement a voucher system where goods can be redeemed by way of a voucher from local businesses that were operating at the time such as the local supermarket; that does have its own generator power source. This would need to be coordinated by a single entity where additional support can be offered to those community members who are vulnerable or at high risk. It would also need to be implemented very quickly with most community members losing what refrigerated/frozen goods they had with a day or so.

Another concern was the lack of fuel availability in Menindee in the short term whereby generators and vehicles could not be refuelled. Again this should be included in the 'Local Emergency Management Committee' (LEMC) plan, it may be included but the community are not aware as they are not invited to participate within the LEMC.

#### Recommendations.

1. NSW Government investigated the feasibility of a purpose-built appliance that can deliver emergency cable connection to quickly recover heavy transmission mains supply.
2. Telephone towers in the remote and Unincorporated Area of NSW have a suitable alternative arrangement be implemented be fitted with backup generators that have the capacity to maintain tower function for at least 24 hours and are to remain onsite permanently.
3. An emergency management plan that must include locations where the community can go and get access to basic facilities, air conditioning, food preparation, storage facilities for food stuff that requires refrigeration and up to date information via a nominated noticeboard.
4. The 'LEMC' 'Local Emergency Management Committee' would be best suited to supervise all relief and support services during such incidents, however this was lacking this was lacking during the October power outages with no clear plan.

5. What other emergency management tools or planning is available to support or modify to suit the Menindee area. Simple things like what UHF radio channel in what area is best to reach emergency services, this information is not currently known.
6. Government should be investigating the application of 'micro networks' particularly in remote towns and villages to guarantee electricity supply during major power outages.

Members of the Brigade look forward to an opportunity to directly address the enquiry should that opportunity arise. Please feel free to contact Graeme McCrabb on [REDACTED] or via email at [REDACTED].

Kind regards,

Graeme McCrabb  
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