

**Submission
No 21**

THE ELECTRICITY OUTAGES AFFECTING FAR WEST NSW IN OCTOBER 2024

Organisation: Country Women's Association of NSW

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Country Women's Association of NSW

*Incorporated in 1931 by an Act of NSW Parliament
Constituent Society of the Associated Country Women of the World*

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Thursday 06 February 2025

Committee Secretary
Legislative Assembly
Committee on Environment and Planning
Inquiry into the electricity outages affecting Far West NSW
Parliament House
Macquarie Street
SYDNEY NSW 2000

Re: Inquiry into the electricity outages affecting Far West NSW in October 2024

The Country Women's Association (CWA) of New South Wales (NSW) is the state's largest women's rural issues advocacy group with well over 8000 members and close to 400 branches across NSW. There is no other rural, regional, remote member-based organisation that has the breadth and depth of membership on matters affecting country people.

The CWA of NSW aims to improve conditions for country women, children, and families by advocating for its members, helping local communities, creating a network of support and meeting together in towns and cities across NSW. The CWA of NSW advocates for positive action on a range of issues that impact the lives of women, children and families throughout NSW.

The CWA of NSW has consistently advocated for fair and equitable electricity pricing and service delivery for regional, rural, and remote communities. Previously, the CWA of NSW also called for state and federal government assurance that electricity, as an essential service, remains accessible, affordable and reliable in all communities in NSW, particularly in regional, rural and remote areas of the state. The CWA of NSW welcomes the opportunity to respond to the *Inquiry into the electricity outages affecting Far West NSW in October 2024 (the Inquiry)*.

The CWA of NSW provides this submission to the Inquiry addressing the impacts and observations reported by members in the Far West Group of NSW in an online questionnaire completed during January 2024. The questions asked aligned with the terms of reference for the Inquiry and gathered their perspectives on community preparedness, response, support received during the outage, communication effectiveness from electricity providers, recovery and recommendations for future emergency preparedness.

PERSONAL IMPACT

The CWA of NSW members reported significant challenges due to the duration of the power outages. These disruptions resulted in food spoilage, health concerns for those relying on medical equipment, and practical inconveniences such as limited communication and loss of income. The use of portable generators became necessary, reflecting the critical need for reliable power supply, especially in remote areas where basic services like telecommunications are unreliable.

- ❖ *"... my mother has a pacemaker, and we have had to purchase a generator to ensure she has access to medical assistance."*
- ❖ *"I was having Vac therapy on my post op wound so the Vac machine would not work when electricity was off"*

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- ❖ *"For the first four or five days it was horribly stressful, worrying about food..."*
- ❖ *"We were without power for 33 hours. The next day we were without power for 12 hours. We then had rolling power outages until the poles were fixed."*
- ❖ *"Loss of food in fridge & freezers because of power failure."*
- ❖ *"No phone service in South Broken Hill meant we had to go 'over the hill' and into the city centre to get reception. This was after the power came back on."*
- ❖ *"It made life very hard. Trying to keep food frozen in the freezer and cold in the fridge was challenging. I had to throw out food which wasn't good after trying to stock up for Xmas."*

COMMUNITY PREPAREDNESS AND RECOVERY

Many members felt inadequately prepared due to the sudden nature of the outages, caused by storm-related damage. Lack of advanced warning impaired their ability to prepare adequately, emphasising the need for improved local readiness and early warning systems.

- ❖ *"No advanced warning. Large storm took out 6 power poles sending electricity to our district."*
- ❖ *"We didn't know it was going to happen therefore we were unprepared."*
- ❖ *There wasn't any notification, so we were not prepared at all for an outage this long."*
- ❖ *"I wasn't prepared at all, I didn't even have a torch, an oversight which has now been rectified. At the time I could not find any battery-operated torches in any of my local stores."*
- ❖ *"If a warning is received, we are able to test generator prior to its use."*
- ❖ *"The big storm knocked out the towers on the Mildura Road which we weren't prepared for. When the power was eventually being restored-& connected we were given notice that it would happen in stages."*
- ❖ *"No preparedness with no warning."*

SUPPORT AND RESPONSE

Communication from electricity providers and government agencies was perceived as inconsistent and often insufficient. While some received SMS updates, clarity and timeliness varied, leading to confusion. Immediate support such as generator provision and food assistance was noted as crucial and it was thought should be more readily available during extended outages.

- ❖ *"Generator to run power to our house would have been helpful."*
- ❖ *"Electricity provider will not cover loss of food."*
- ❖ *"Would have been much better if TransGrid had maintained the backup generators."*
- ❖ *"Given the continuous outages in rural communities think the Government / Electricity providers should be providing generators to customers if electricity cannot be restored within a reasonable period (say 2 days) with the exception of a major storm event like that recently experienced in Sydney."*
- ❖ *"Electricity worker suggested to my brother that he should purchase a generator as they couldn't tell him when they would restore power."*
- ❖ *"Disappointing in 2025 that we do not have an electricity provider that can assist and restore power to all customers not those in the city areas within say maximum 2 days and if they can't make some payment for loss of food or discount the next invoice and/or provide generators."*
- ❖ *"The assistance eventually came in the form of a \$250 voucher and a box of dry goods which helped because a lot of my food perished..."*
- ❖ *"I wasn't aware of any assistance or support that was available until I saw the RFDS (Royal Flying Doctor Service) Wellbeing Place was open and providing coffee, tea, water and generator power to charge my phone while I was on my daily walk."*
- ❖ *"I think more nonperishable food distribution, better emergency procedures in White Cliffs, a solution"*

for the issue of Telstra tower battery only lasting 6 hours, maybe WiFi for everyone I don't know how it works but I think people who had WiFi still had phone and internet coverage."

- ❖ *"No, I wasn't aware of any assistance during the outages. Generators given more quickly..."*
- ❖ *"Would like to be able to have a generator on hand, but they aren't cheap!"*
- ❖ *"The city needs to be better prepared and have transformers fully maintained. It was pretty poor seeing Broken Hill has a Solar Farm."*
- ❖ *"I think that government grants or subsidies to empower people with solar/battery systems and /or generators that actually will work during outages, although we have the same postcode as Wilcannia, 2836, White Cliffs does not get 1/4 of the funding or support or services that is offered to Wilcannia, this was also evident during covid."*
- ❖ *"More availability of emergency generators. Quicker response with emergency supplies. BH is quite isolated, and it takes quite a while to drive equipment here. Need a problem solver to get here quicker or have a permanent solution in Broken Hill."*

COMMUNICATION AND INFORMATION

Effective communication during the outage was identified as a critical area for improvement. Members relied on local radio stations and community leaders for reliable updates, highlighting the disparity in communication effectiveness between local channels and official notifications from TransGrid and Essential Energy.

- ❖ *"Minimal communication just we are working on it."*
- ❖ *"I found the lack of effective communication worrying. I feel the 0444 444 444 mobile number could have been utilised to provide updates within the affected area on services available during times of no power instead of having to search Facebook for updates. Essential energy did eventually start providing updates which were so general as to be useless."*
- ❖ *"The Central Darling Shire was not very helpful with information, but if you followed local member's page once the phones were working, he was trying to keep everyone up to date."*
- ❖ *"Information was too general, not specific. Reports of the causes of the continuing outages were contradictory between Essential Energy SMS messages, TransGrid, ABC, mayoral and ministerial FB posts. It was frustrating."*
- ❖ *"The information received was very poor from TransGrid. The only reliable information we received was from the local ABC radio station and our local member."*
- ❖ *"Be specific even if it is "we have no idea yet what has happened" or "we are unable to say when the power will back on". Being told it will be 2 hours before power returns and ending up being 5 hours upsets any plans you may have made for feeding your family or performing household tasks."*
- ❖ *"There are a lot of elderly people who do not have mobile phones or has no coverage. more radio announcements would assist in getting the messages out."*
- ❖ *"We received text messages when some power was on - it was estimating time which wasn't always accurate."*

LEARNING FROM EXPERIENCE

Based on impacted member feedback the following recommendations are made:

- **Recommendation:** Improve infrastructure maintenance, including replacing aging power poles.
- **Recommendation:** Enhance communication strategies, utilising more reliable platforms such as local radio and a designated emergency contact number.
- **Recommendation:** Provide more accessible support services during outages, including generators and food provisions, particularly in remote communities like White Cliffs.
- **Recommendation:** Ensure equitable support across all rural areas, addressing disparities in service provision observed during the crises.

CONCLUSION

The CWA of NSW urges the Committee to consider these insights and recommendations in formulating strategies to enhance preparedness, response, and recovery efforts in regional, rural, and remote NSW to mitigate the occurrence and impact of electricity outages on vulnerable communities and ensure equitable access to essential services.

Yours faithfully,



Joy Beames
President CWA of NSW