

REPORT ON PROCEEDINGS BEFORE

**LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY COMMITTEE ON
ENVIRONMENT AND PLANNING**

**INQUIRY INTO THE ELECTRICITY OUTAGES AFFECTING FAR
WEST NSW IN OCTOBER 2024**

At White Cliffs Hotel, White Cliffs on Wednesday 5 March 2025

The Committee met at 8:20 am

PRESENT

Mr Clayton Barr (Chair)

Mrs Judy Hannan
Mrs Sally Quinnell (Deputy Chair)
Ms Maryanne Stuart
Mr James Wallace

The CHAIR: Before we begin, I acknowledge the Barkandji people, who are the traditional custodians of this land on which we are meeting. I pay my respects to Elders of country, and to any Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who may be present with us today. Welcome to our third town hall meeting for the New South Wales Parliament Legislative Assembly Committee on Environment and Planning. This meeting is part of our inquiry into the electricity outages that affected the region from last October. My name is Clayton Barr and I am the Chair. With me are my fellow members: Sally Quinnell, the Deputy Chair; Maryanne Stuart, the member for Heathcote; Judy Hannan, the member for Wollondilly; and James Wallace, the member for Hornsby.

We appreciate all of you who are here today in this early morning session to speak with us. The Committee has received some feedback from the community regarding the significant impacts of last year's outages on White Cliffs. We're really happy to hear from you today. We understand entirely that this is a very intimidating sort of look, but we are absolutely just a very casual, backwards and forwards conversation. We are going to invite you, one at a time, to come up and have your say, and we might have some questions backwards and forwards, and then we'll get the next person to come up and do that.

We also would ask you to state your name before you speak, and if you haven't already registered, could you do that with our staff. We want to encourage open dialogue. We do ask you not to make any defamatory comments using individuals' names. If there's something that was frustrating, we might just refer to that person as "person X" or something like that. We also will be taking photos that might be used on our Committee website. If you've got any concerns about that, please let us know. We will now begin with our first speaker.

DICK WAGNER, before the Committee: I'm Dick Wagner, part of Southern Cross Opals, with my wife and my son, who are here also. We mine for opals and also market them as well. Power outages don't affect us as much as a lot of the general community. We already have our own portable generator set up, so if the power goes out it's not a problem for us to hook into the generators that we've got and run it. A week to 10 days, yeah, that's a little bit stressful, but there's a lot of other people here that are a lot worse off than what we are. The biggest issue we have in White Cliffs is telecommunications. We have a tower up here on Turleys Hill. Three to four hours after the power goes out, we have no mobile phone reception—bingo, that's it.

It's been raised with Telstra dozens of times over the last 20-odd years, and it is an appalling situation. As I say, the battery goes flat. Telstra do have a generator onsite, but the technician to start the generator is based in Dubbo, a six- or seven-hour drive. And it depends on what time of the day or night that the power goes off. They don't know initially whether it's going to be off for 20 seconds or for three days. Sometimes the technician doesn't get the guernsey to come out and start the generator, so we are regularly days without telecommunications. The clever bureaucrats—I do apologise—

The CHAIR: No, that's okay.

DICK WAGNER: Sorry, that's defamatory.

The CHAIR: No, it's not.

DICK WAGNER: They gave the hospital a satphone. That's fine. The hospital already have a satphone in the ambulance. One person in the hospital can ring out, but nobody can ring in. So once the power goes out, no communications, we're back in the 1890s, a hundred years ago. I don't know whether it's appalling or ridiculous. Whatever the situation is, Telstra are aware of it and have been aware of it for many years. It doesn't happen in other remote situations. I think you've already been to Tibooburra. If the power goes out up there, the generator automatically kicks in. It's not rocket science, but for some reason White Cliffs don't have that situation available to us. I've got a file at home an inch thick of complaints to Telstra about mobile phone coverage and power outages and all that sort of thing. Maybe it's their way of getting even with us. That's on the communications side of it.

The solution is the second part of this. This is written as myself in support of Rhonda Hynch, who basically put this together. She's a Wilcannia lady—and I'm sure you'll meet her today—very well switched on. I'm president of the miners association. We wrote in support of the funding application for Essential Energy's installation of microgrids in Wilcannia and White Cliffs, throughout the Australian Renewable Energy Agency's Regional Microgrids Program. It's all in that thingo there. Basically the idea is to put solar systems and batteries in remote communities: Us. It would also affect Tibooburra, Dilpurra and a lot of others as well. The main event we had last year—that will happen again. The ageing network that our poles and wires come in, the line from Wentworth to Broken Hill, should have been replaced either 20 or 22 years ago. Broken Hill would have told you that. Oh, you haven't been to Broken Hill—sorry.

The CHAIR: Tomorrow.

DICK WAGNER: Tomorrow. It's just an ageing network, the system down there. Next time we get a big windstorm, the next kilometre is going to blow over. It's not something that they've fixed—a wind tunnel area or something like that. The next time we get a big event, a bit of rain, a bit of wind—out again. Previously, a couple of years ago, they had a big outage at Fowlers Gap on the way up to Tibooburra. What happened then was they couldn't get the service vehicles into the area to fix the power outage. They had to wait for it to dry out for them to get in there, and that was basically another week. I think they're trying to do some sort of a looping system where, if that arm goes out, they can isolate that, but I'm not a hundred per cent sure of that. That's something for Essential Energy to be able to help you out with there.

But this microgrids system that Rhonda Hynch put together—absolutely beautiful. It addresses the problem, gives you the solution. Whether you've got any pull with the Australian Renewable Energy Agency's microgrid, that's where the pressure needs to be put so that we can get those systems put out here. Then it doesn't matter if Telstra are not going to do anything with the tower up there; we've got our own independent grid, we're going to be all right. All right?

The CHAIR: All right.

DICK WAGNER: Open to questions.

The CHAIR: For questions, I'll go left to right. Maryanne?

Ms MARYANNE STUART: What we've heard a lot of is the effect it's having on businesses, because you rely quite heavily on tourism. Do you want to talk about how it might have impacted—

DICK WAGNER: The biggest impact we had was the SES getting on the TV and saying "Don't travel to the Far West. They've got no power." The pub here have their own generator, the shop have their own generator, we have our own generator. It affected us, but it didn't affect us. That was the biggest effect we had on tourism, that the SES came on and said don't travel out here. That's only White Cliffs I can speak for. I can't speak for other towns. For White Cliffs, as far as we're concerned, we were okay. We can have tourism. Yes, it was an inconvenience, but it wasn't insurmountable.

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: I just wanted to talk about the communications when power went out, the contact from energy companies, government, emergency services. Can you just expand a little bit on what you were told, by whom, when, and what you had to seek out versus what came willingly?

DICK WAGNER: Primarily, by the time we realised that the power was going to be out for a while, we had no communications. Eventually, Broken Hill were able to put generators online, which worked very spasmodically. Yes, we got notifications, once through text messages from Telstra, to say that the power was out and it could be out for a while, we're not sure how long it's going to be out for, all that sort of thing. But we still had radio and television and all that sort of thing. We basically were able to get the information, because we run our own generators. It was only the communications through Telstra that we didn't have. Yes, you've got to understand, I think you've got to sympathise with Ausgrid, is that the main power—they're the people that—

The CHAIR: Transgrid.

DICK WAGNER: Transgrid, is it? Yes. It was something that they should have known about. If I have been told that the powers and wires from Broken Hill to Wentworth should have been replaced 20 years ago, they must have known about it as well. I don't know that they can do anything to stop it happening again, apart from replacing the whole network. I don't think that they can—it's just going to happen.

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: When the power came back on, was White Cliffs part of the load sharing—

DICK WAGNER: Yes.

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: Were you given specific times that power would be on and off during that load sharing?

DICK WAGNER: Look, seriously, I can't recall. We probably were. We knew the seriousness of the situation, with the poles being down, and we knew that the amount of power that was going to be on was going to be not enough to do the whole area. We'd got the gist of that. We just thought, "It'll be right. It'll come back on when it comes back on. We'll get notification that she's up and running." That took weeks, basically.

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: But you were leaning quite heavily on the generator in those interims?

DICK WAGNER: Yes. And give Premier Minns his due, he came out and he addressed the meeting at Wilcannia. About 10 of us from White Cliffs attended. He got a bit of a pasting down there because of the \$200 per household. Some of the people down there said, "You know, we've got 10 or 12 people living in our household. That goes nowhere. It doesn't even buy nappies for the week." Yes, good on him for coming out here

and trying to get on the front foot with the problem, but it didn't fix the problem that's still there. It's still there today.

Mr JAMES WALLACE: I just had one question: Some of the submissions we received talked about Telstra and the failure to have the generator during the outage, and the fact that apparently the generator broke down. There was talk in one of the submissions we received about locals organising their own generator to go up there. Did that happen?

DICK WAGNER: We're not allowed onsite. We could have. We don't have a problem with that. It would have been something we could have done, but it just got to the stage it was a ridiculous situation from Telstra's perspective. They're a law unto themselves.

Mr JAMES WALLACE: Did that happen? Did you guys try to source your own generator to fix it?

DICK WAGNER: Me? I didn't, no. I wasn't aware of it. But, yes, there's your solution.

LINDSAY WHITE, before the Committee: The biggest problem we've got here, we've got 50 people here over the age of 60. When the power goes out, they cannot even ring the hospital. It's just a ridiculous situation. Medical alert bracelets, all of that stuff, it just doesn't work. So someone is going to die. I've been at this for years, trying to get something done. Nobody's got the balls to stand up and actually do something. We had a meeting at the hall with the Minister. The two generators that were up there, when we used to have a power outage 20 or 30 years ago, someone from the council went up, started the generator and we were back online. It was just so easy. Then, in all that time, the two generators, so-called, broke. They both were useless. The Minister promised me that she would put not one but two generators up there, so that if one broke down we had another one. Because people's lives are in danger. It's a serious bloody thing this. We don't have to have power poles fall over. We have a small storm, maybe three or four points of rain and the power goes out. It shouldn't be called Essential Energy; it should be called part-time energy. It's just not good enough.

The CHAIR: When you say a couple of generators up at the hall, you mean the hall just up the road here?

LINDSAY WHITE: No, up at our tower, up top, up here.

Mr JAMES WALLACE: The Telstra tower?

LINDSAY WHITE: Yes. Three hours, two or three hours, no power. No-one can ring. No-one can do anything. They fixed the hospital. I wrote to the Minister and they said, "We've fixed the problem at White Cliffs. We've given them an extra satphone." Satphones are as unreliable as whatever. "And we've given them a generator." Which was great, but they didn't realise that you've missed the whole point, that people can't ring the hospital. Just being a sort of an elderly population, we've got a big problem.

Mr JAMES WALLACE: When you say the Minister promised to get two generators at the Telstra tower—

LINDSAY WHITE: Yes, up there. I don't know if they're even up there.

Mr JAMES WALLACE: Do you know when that was, or which Minister that was?

LINDSAY WHITE: Dick, do you know who that was? The lady?

DICK WAGNER: I think it might have been the last Liberal communications Minister.

The CHAIR: So about three, four or five years ago?

LINDSAY WHITE: No, only—the hall, when they came up? This was back when the bloody power outage was, just after.

DICK WAGNER: No, sorry, that was State.

LINDSAY WHITE: About a month after.

The CHAIR: So this was October/November last year?

LINDSAY WHITE: Yes.

Mrs JUDY HANNAN: Penny Sharpe.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: It might have been Minister Sharpe.

LINDSAY WHITE: I said, "Look, we need a generator up there that works and somebody to go up and fuel it and start it." Unless it's automatic. But I don't know if anything has happened because we're not allowed to go near there or say anything.

Mrs JUDY HANNAN: You've talked about the number of people over 60. In other areas they have local emergency management committees that have a log of those people, and a system of checking on those people. Is there such a thing here?

LINDSAY WHITE: We have the best nurses up here at the clinic. They run around, but when you've got 50-odd people, how long does that take to get around? One gentleman here had a stroke and a heart attack, and it was only just luckily that a local went to say g'day. He passed away a couple of weeks ago.

Mrs JUDY HANNAN: But there's no formal plan and strategy?

LINDSAY WHITE: No, there's nothing like that, to make sure that people are safe here.

Mrs JUDY HANNAN: Does anybody here have Starlink at all, or is everything—

LINDSAY WHITE: There is. There's quite a few starting now, but we're still relying on Telstra mainly.

Mrs JUDY HANNAN: That is very serious.

LINDSAY WHITE: There's a few businesses here that do have generators, but there's people out here that have nothing. Their fridges—they just lose all the food, everything else. Every time there's a power outage it destroys the electrical system. Your fridge is not going to last as long. Every time, there's a boop-boop-boop. Sometimes it's like Morse code. The power's on; the power's off; the power's on; the power's off.

The CHAIR: Okay. You're describing a situation where that's not uncommon. If you just get a bit of rain, it's out.

LINDSAY WHITE: Yes, absolutely.

The CHAIR: The massive event that happened last October, obviously, wiped out the big poles down south, but you're describing also—

LINDSAY WHITE: There's another inherent problem somewhere in the system. Only recently we had—maybe two months ago, we had a little storm of rain, maybe three or four points; power goes out.

The CHAIR: In those smaller events, it goes out for an hour, or twenty minutes, or a day?

LINDSAY WHITE: You just don't know. Then you ring up and, of course, they don't know. "We don't know where the problem is" is the answer you get. It's nice to at least talk to somebody, instead of getting a machine and counting numbers—push 4, push 5, push 6. That's it.

The CHAIR: Thanks, Lindsay.

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: Lindsay, I saw you comment—well, nod, shake head—when I was talking about communications. Can you just take me through and expand that physical comment that you made about receiving communications from the companies about the power, and when it's coming back on and what they expect?

LINDSAY WHITE: They just didn't know anything. So the communications were—

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: Did they tell you they didn't know?

LINDSAY WHITE: Yes. They were saying, "We're trying to work on the problem and don't know." That's fair enough. This is a big area. We're not talking Melbourne to Geelong or something. We're talking a massive damn area.

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: Yes, okay. Thanks.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much, Lindsay. Matt, do you want to make some opening comments before we go to questions?

MATT YOUNG, before the Committee: Following on from Dick and Lindsay with telecommunications, it's not just White Cliffs that is affected with our tower. It is a repeater tower for Packsaddle, Milparinka, Tibooburra and Moomba. It could potentially affect 2,000 people if all the gas workers are up there, so it is a lot bigger issue than just White Cliffs. With the generators that are set up there—they were decommissioned, I don't know when. There has been technicians in the pub, in the bar. You talk to them and they don't know about it. They don't know why it's like it. They know that there should be another generator set up, up there. All the tanks are there, the changeover switches—everything is there to just whack another generator on, so it's a pretty simple

thing that can be done. Reece from Central Darling shire has said that there is going to be something happening with the generator for the tower.

Going on with the communications, with whether we were informed with the load sharing, we were getting text messages saying that it would be turned off at six. It might have been turned off at five, but it might have come back on at ten o'clock that night when they said it was going to be off till six—from six to 12. So it was very erratic and not accurate, the times that it was supposed to be happening. As far as we were getting told not to run solar, because it was interrupting the grid—but they didn't know whether or how much power to put out, where to send it to. We've got a fair bit of solar here, but we can't just rely on the solar. We haven't got any battery backup. But I spoke to Pauly Sutton, who is pretty much the main Essential Energy worker around here. He said, "No, just run your solar. Run it as normal; it will help us with the grid," because we were putting a fair bit into it. In Broken Hill, where there's a lot of little systems, it was making it—when one's on, one's off, and Broken Hill had four or five different load share sections just in itself. People were not running solar because "Stuff Transgrid—we don't want to put anything back into the grid because we're not getting anything for it," because it couldn't go anywhere. So they were leaving their solar off completely until the power came back on full time.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: Thanks, Matt. Can you talk me through—you said someone from Central Darling Shire Council said that something was going to go on.

MATT YOUNG: Yes, Reece Wilson. He's the foreman. Overseer, basically. Engineer.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: What was the thing that was going on? I missed that, sorry.

MATT YOUNG: That there will be something happening with the generator set-up, and someone from the council to be able to fuel it up and start it up.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: Great. Thank you.

MATT YOUNG: It should be an automatic changeover switch like they have at the clinic, and then someone just needs to fuel it up, which happens in the clinic. Anyone from around town—basically, David Hays, Blue White, myself—would just go and fuel it up so the nurses didn't have to. Diesel's not that nice to work with out of a jerry can. The nurses have to just fill up a jerry can from the shop and go and pour it in, which is not good enough either, I don't think.

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: Not ideal.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: No. Thanks, Matt.

Mr JAMES WALLACE: I'm just going to ask about the dynamics with Essential Energy. Dick talked about that idea of a microgrid. Is that something that Essential Energy has talked to people in the town about pursuing? Or they haven't really raised that with you? It's generated from the town itself? Is there a conversation there that's going on?

MATT YOUNG: There has been little snippets come out of microgrids, yes—Rhonda Lynch, or Lee, as we know her. It's not a complete solution to the problem but we have a lot more waste or lesser-valued country out here. I think a lot of grids should be set up out here, like the main grid.

Mr JAMES WALLACE: Has Essential Energy spoken about that? Have they talked about doing something like that?

MATT YOUNG: Not so much Essential Energy. Essential Energy just maintain the lines around here—you know, patch them up. They don't maintain them; they just patch them up and restore the power. Same thing with the brownouts that we get. Little bit of rain, there's trees close to powerlines, crows build a nest on top of the powerline, a stick gets wet, shorts out. When a power brownout or an outage—it might go out once and then come back on again for five seconds, then go out again, come back on again, so they blast the line. If they can't get it to stay on within three goes, they know there's a major fault. But if it's only a damp stick that's shorting it out, they'll try and blow it off. That's where a lot of the little power outages are from.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: We've been hearing consistently about people losing their freezers and fridges because there's a power surge when it comes back on again. We've just had beautiful food. Has that ever affected you?

MATT YOUNG: We have lost—just in the last 12 months, we've got three freezers and two fridges gone.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: And that's because of those power surges when the electricity comes back on?

MATT YOUNG: I think so, yes. Even our ice machines—we've got a fair bit in whitegoods, like washing machines. Even one of our big washing machines, it's got a circuit board that's \$5,000. It needs a new circuit board now, so it's just sitting in the back shed.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: Do you think that affects your insurance premiums?

MATT YOUNG: Definitely, yes. The more you claim, the more it's going to go up.

The CHAIR: They prefer just taking money in, not handing it out.

MATT YOUNG: Can I do say one more thing? With the SES saying, "Don't come out here," when we are putting in, say, \$500 a day into a generator, fuelling it up and we've got up to \$20,000 of stock, we want people to come and buy it. We've still got staff to pay, and when they get told, "Don't come here," and you've just got cancellation after cancellation—we've all got to get paid. It's no good for a local economy. Our staff don't get the work. We can't send the food back to Broken Hill, so it's got to be eaten. If freezers die, you can't keep it forever.

ANN SCOTT, before the Committee: I'm sorry for being late. I'm the newest member in town, probably. I've only been here just over a year. I'm sure they've all covered everything. There is one thing. I got my Essential Energy bill, which is pretty high. A friend of mine is with Red Energy and got a \$75 rebate for loss of power for the Broken Hill listed on the bill, but there's nothing on Essential Energy. When I rang Essential Energy to question the bill because I live on my own, it shouldn't have been as high as it was, and I mentioned this, immediately she offered me a \$50 discount over the phone. So she obviously had the power to go for a \$50 discount to keep me quiet, which I accepted, obviously. But, yes, I just thought it was a bit rude that—I don't know who gives the discount, whether it's something they claim from the Government, but if they're not passing it on, that's a bit nasty. That's about all I've really got to say, apart from everything else.

The CHAIR: We were having a conversation last night, and you might all be able to help here about who the retailers are. Transgrid brings the big power to Broken Hill. Essential then has the responsibility to get the power out to everyone, but then you have an arrangement with a retailer and it might be—

ANN SCOTT: I'm with Essential Energy, but other people are with Red Energy.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: Is anyone with Origin?

ANN SCOTT: Origin, I'm with. Yes, Origin is Essential.

The CHAIR: AGL?

ANN SCOTT: I haven't even heard of them.

The CHAIR: No, that's okay. We're just clarifying that definitely Essential is your retail provider.

ANN SCOTT: Well, it's Origin.

The CHAIR: Who sends you your electricity bill?

ANN SCOTT: The bill comes from Origin. Origin's on the bill, yes. Red Energy did give the discount, but Origin didn't.

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: Is that person who got the discount in White Cliffs?

ANN SCOTT: Yes, just around the corner.

The CHAIR: That is very helpful. We couldn't quite understand where Essential started and stopped.

ANN SCOTT: I don't really understand it either.

The CHAIR: We didn't know if they were an actual retailer, but they retail as Origin. In response, I don't think the Government was providing money to those companies to give you an offset.

ANN SCOTT: It was themselves, yes.

The CHAIR: I think those individual companies were choosing—

Ms MARYANNE STUART: As a good-faith thing.

ANN SCOTT: Yes, don't know.

The CHAIR: I think. But we'll be talking to most of them tomorrow.

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: Can I ask the room a question? Feel free whoever can answer this to come up to the microphone. Did you have any problem accessing fuel during this time? We've heard from other places that fuel was an issue, and therefore checking on people on stations was an issue because of access to fuel.

MATT YOUNG: With the fuel issues, the turbines in Broken Hill apparently were using 8,000 litres an hour, so most of the IOR trucks were going straight to fuelling up the turbines. From Adelaide there were other fuel companies as well. I know we had about 4,000 litres in our IOR tank here. The council were actually planning to do roadworks, and that would take 2,000 litres a day when we are not knowing how long the power is going to be out for. Between everyone in town, we're probably using 500 litres of diesel a day as well, so we probably had three days worth of fuel in town here. She had fuel over at the shop as well, but how much she had and when was going to be her next delivery, that's an unknown thing. We did end up with a truckload of fuel and getting the IOR tank filled because the turbine blew up in Broken Hill, so they wouldn't be using that amount of fuel and they could send a truck to other areas.

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: In other areas we heard the IOR mechanism wasn't working because they didn't have a phone connection with the mothership. Was that an issue here?

MATT YOUNG: It was, yes.

The CHAIR: With the IOR thing, the toggles and stuff need to talk to the satellites, so telecommunication is a problem. But for the shop across the road pumping their fuel—

MATT YOUNG: It's just the normal switch it on. The bowser's on as long as it's got power.

The CHAIR: Because they had generators, they were able to run and pump?

MATT YOUNG: Yes. When the shop's only open from just say nine to five, with a lot of emergency services, they've have got an IOR tag. So if they need to go and do something and they can't get fuel, they've got to wait until nine o'clock the next morning until the shop opens, but with an IOR tag they can fuel up 24 hours a day.

The CHAIR: But the IORs weren't working because telecommunications by this stage had fallen over?

MATT YOUNG: Yes.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: Tomorrow the Committee is meeting with Telstra, Hydrostor, Tilt Renewables, AGL, Essential and Transgrid. Is there anything further that you would like us to ask them on your behalf?

RUSSELL WAGNER, before the Committee: I just think in a remote town like this we should not have lost landlines. When the tower used to go out, you could still make a phone call. I can remember as a kid growing up, when the power went out, you could still make a phone call.

SARAH KER, before the Committee: The landlines didn't go out.

RUSSELL WAGNER: Yes, now they do. They didn't used to.

SARAH KER: So when the tower goes out, the landlines go out as well.

LINDSAY WHITE: One of the big problems we've got here is insurance. Because we're the same postcode as Wilcannia—nobody wants to touch Wilcannia because of the problems. So even the council, I believe, could not get insurance in New South Wales because of their postcode. The red flag comes up. I've tried five companies for Elders. Everyone knocked me back to get the insurance. This is even like your refrigeration or anything, and the council are getting insurance through London, possibly Lloyd's of London. Because what happened, with our underground homes here, the council wanted to get us outside their area so that they weren't responsible for—we've been having water coming into dugouts. Because the water's put on top of the hill, if one of their lines break—the country here has faults and stuff and the water travels down the faults, floods the dugout. Once dugouts get water in them, it can absolutely destroy your dugout.

We can't get insurance underground; we can't even get insurance above ground. So it's a massive problem. We can change our postcode if we declare ourself a village. This place was declared a village 100 years ago, so we can change our postcode. If we do that we lose all our medical services, which come from Maari Ma in Broken Hill. Because we're on the same postcode, we get all this great medical service, which we really appreciate. So the insurance thing is massive. You can't insure your fridges; you can't insure anything. So when the power goes out, you are buggered.

Mr JAMES WALLACE: Did people claim that \$200 or \$400 for businesses that came from the Government? Did you have problems with claiming that or did it all work smoothly?

DICK WAGNER: We got it sorted out in the end. There were issues with identification. Just because you've got a rates notice for your dugout, it didn't suit Service NSW. But I had a gentle chat with them, and the next time they came out they said, "No, it's all been sorted out". It was all okay.

Mr JAMES WALLACE: How long after the outage did you get the money?

DICK WAGNER: It was this year.

Mr JAMES WALLACE: This year—2025?

DICK WAGNER: January or February, I think, this year. The people from Service NSW were quite good. They helped people through the paperwork. There was a little bit of a glitch early on, but they were able to go back and see the error of their ways and fix it, which was quite good.

Mr JAMES WALLACE: The council has been pretty vocal in saying that that was a bad program, that \$200 or \$400. What would have been better is if the Government created a tab at every pub, every local business, every supermarket, so people could go access that. Do you think that would have worked around here? Would that have been practical?

DICK WAGNER: I think you'll find that was Wilcannia, and that was the biggest issue they had in there. I think out here, where there's singles or maybe couples in a dugout, the \$200—or in our case, with the business, the \$400—was okay. It didn't go anywhere near the fuel costs but it was something. A lot of grief came from Wilcannia, and you'll hear about that.

Mr JAMES WALLACE: I appreciate that, thank you.

DICK WAGNER: It was a great gesture. It's a shame that the Feds didn't come on board and match it, or help out in any way whatsoever, and they didn't. That left the State Government out on a limb. But you've got to sympathise with poor old Minnsy. He had a go—had a dip.

MATT YOUNG: Also, with that \$200 that people are claiming, I know people that didn't even pay a power bill—they live off-grid, out in the fields—got the \$200. It was "Have you claimed your \$200 yet?" and, when they said no, "Oh, we'll sign you up for it." And they got it.

DICK WAGNER: But that was actually the people from Service NSW. They were the people that said to us that it was available for everyone. It wasn't necessarily a rate notice; you just had to prove you were a resident. But initially the rate notice wasn't sufficient.

The CHAIR: On that note, I'd like to thank everybody, sincerely, for giving us some of your time and your wisdom and your thoughts today. It's absolutely important that we hear from everybody. I want to emphasise that your local member of Parliament, Roy Butler, was instrumental in us having this inquiry, but also us getting out to the communities instead of sitting in Sydney, or even Broken Hill, and trying to hear from communities from a distance.

Our process from here is to write the report and make some recommendations, which then go to Government, and it's then on the government of the day as to whether they accept and implement the recommendations that we make. I'm sure your local MP, Roy, will be chomping at the heels of the Government around that sort of stuff. From here, we also would like to get out to each of you a copy of the transcript of today's meeting so that you can check that what you said was true and accurately recorded by our Hansard team. But we don't have email addresses for some of you, so if you could just confirm today that you've got confidence in the system, that would be fine. Ultimately, the transcript will be published. The secretariat will have explained that witnesses can remain anonymous if they want to. With that, I will close the meeting. Matt, thank you for your hospitality in having us and making this room available today. We really appreciate it.

The Committee adjourned at 09:05.