

Powerline bushfire safety

Energy Safe Victoria



20 March 2019

ESV Community update

The 10-year anniversary of the Black Saturday fires and the one-year anniversary of the St Patrick's Day fires have just passed. We remember the suffering, loss and devastation caused by these bushfires and our thoughts are with the many victims of those fires. The mission to avoid a repeat of scale of these disasters is a constant reminder of the importance of the work we do and the many other agencies engaged in that same mission.

ESV is the independent regulator responsible for administering the Acts and regulations that require electricity distribution businesses (DBs) to design, maintain and operate their assets safely.

We do this by assuring the community that the DBs systems are fit for purpose and that they are held to account for delivering the plans accepted by ESV.

Since St Patrick's Day 2018, ESV has comprehensively investigated the associated six fires, two of which have led to further technical investigations with ongoing legal investigations.

In addition to these investigations, which may ultimately lead to enforcement action and/or prosecution, ESV has continued to test and challenge the DBs' systems to ensure they remain fit for purpose and that risks continue to be mitigated as far as practicable, particularly in light of climate change. To this end, ESV:

- inspected a sample of 202 older wooden poles around Terang to determine whether the existing inspection practices were appropriate and could identify potentially defective poles. Of the 202 poles inspected, 20 required follow up and more detailed testing; and
- conducted further sonic testing of those 20 plus a further 20 sound poles.

These tests enabled ESV to conclude that, if carried out correctly, the standard industry inspection practice would identify all potential cavities in poles. Whilst it found some poles required further analysis, this did not constitute evidence of a systemic issue.

Following the discovery of deteriorating poles on the Sparrow Spur by community members in late December, ESV extended its own independent inspections to obtain a statistically significant sample on the state of older wooden poles in the south-west.

These independent inspections of more than a thousand poles identified 71 poles as requiring follow up (sonic testing), but supported the earlier conclusion that there was no direct or conclusive evidence of a systemic issue. ESV has not yet received the results of the sonic testing, which is expected in late March.

In addition to this work, ESV participated in the specification of and closely observed the destructive testing of 12 poles at a NSW testing laboratory. Powercor removed these poles from Craven and Sparrow Spurs, which included poles found to have clear splits and daylight visible through them. While we are yet to receive the final report and raw data, all except one of the poles exceeded the strength required to safely stay in service. It is not yet clear to ESV why or how the one pole failed. We will pursue the raw data to establish the cause by end of March.

We will continue to engage with the community on this work and our progress.

When this work is complete, ESV will produce a comprehensive report of its findings and present it to the community.

ESV also notes that Powercor has inspected a further 19,000 poles, and has sought the inspection report and the raw data to independently validate the conclusions.

ESV recognises that even if it finally concludes there are no systemic concerns regarding the health of Powercor's poles, this is not sufficient to provide long-term assurance to the community. ESV will investigate, in depth, the asset management practice of all distribution businesses to satisfy itself and the Victorian community that their current approaches are not leading to a problem in the future and the overall health of the DBs' infrastructure will be maintained in the long term. This is a process of continuous oversight, not just a one-off project.

"I take my responsibilities and accountabilities under the Act very seriously. I must however act in accordance with the law," said Director of Energy Safety, Paul Fearon.

"Energy Safe Victoria will hold Powercor to account and prosecute if necessary for breaches of Act. We will also continue to provide the necessary assurance that their systems for maintaining designing and operating their electricity assets are safe. To this end, we remain committed to communicating and working with the community to ensure we have maximum visibility of the state of powerlines and poles.

"At this stage there is no systemic issue in terms of the performance of electricity networks; however, more work and analysis is required before this can be conclusively determined.

"Since 2009, ESV has been given substantial increased resources and new powers to hold all power companies to account. The last 10 years has also seen unprecedented investment, the employment of new technologies and funding of targeted work replacing and undergrounding lines. Whilst we acknowledge that not all risk can be removed, I am confident that government, industry and the regulator are working very hard to improve safety outcomes."

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