

Media Release

Energy Safe Victoria

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ESV investigation requires safety improvements for Powercor pole regime

An Energy Safe Victoria report has determined that electricity distribution business Powercor must improve and expand its inspection and replacement regime for wooden power poles to ensure community safety over the long term.

The report, *Powercor Wood Pole Management*, is the second part of a detailed investigation by the energy safety regulator into Powercor to ensure it is sustainably managing its wooden pole fleet. The first of these reports – released in July – looked at the immediate risk of power pole standards to communities and noted it would examine the long-term ability of Powercor’s pole management regime to deliver approved safety outcomes for the community, which is the subject of the new report.

The new report also flags ESV’s timeline for conducting systematic investigations into all electricity distribution businesses to ensure that their pole management practices deliver sustainable safety outcomes for all Victorians. Commencing in 2020, these investigations will start with AusNet Services.

The catastrophic failure of a Powercor power pole in Garvoc on St Patrick’s Day 2018 led to a devastating fire that killed livestock and destroyed property. ESV’s initial investigation found that while there were shortcomings in Powercor’s processes, the changes they had implemented meant there were no immediate systematic risks of power poles failing.

The new report, which has been released for public consultation, examined Powercor’s end-to-end asset management of wooden power poles, including inspection, maintenance and replacement. It found that Powercor’s asset management practices in place at the time of the fires were inadequate to deliver long-term safety outcomes. Further, changes made by Powercor in the aftermath of the 2018 fires, which increased the volume of pole replacements and reinforcements, were insufficient to deliver long-term safety outcomes.

ESV has concluded that to reduce the long-term risk of power poles failing and the associated threat to community safety, Powercor must implement a series of recommendations.

The recommendations include:

- improving inspection practice and rigour
- improving the training of power pole inspectors and clarifying their responsibilities
- better methodology to predict the likelihood of pole failure over time, particularly in high bushfire risk areas
- take cognisance of the consequence of failure when assessing poles for replacement by implementing risk-based asset management
- explore options for technology that will improve the accuracy of pole condition assessments.

ESV will hold Powercor to account for meeting each of these recommendations, ensuring pole replacement strategies are incorporated into its Bushfire Mitigation Plans (BMPs). It is an offence not to comply with an accepted BMP.

Finally, ESV will require all distribution businesses to provide consistent reporting to ESV on wooden pole management and performance.

The community, industry and stakeholders are all invited to review the report and provide comments or opinions. The report is available at www.esv.vic.gov.au. Submissions can be sent to consultation@energysafe.vic.gov.au.

ESV has laid charges against Powercor over two of the St Patricks Day fires – the Garvoc fire involving a broken power pole and a fire at Terang caused by clashing conductors. The case will be heard at the Warrnambool Magistrates Court in January.

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