

SOUTH GIPPSLAND OUTAGE

Loss Of Services

Our Kongwak community families experienced a terrifying incident in South Gippsland, when the February mini tornado ripped through our community. and it was over in a matter of minutes. But around us it was like a scene from a disaster movie. Many of our community had no power or telecommunications for days, as huge eucalyptus gums lay broken or uplifted debris was strewn across roads, paths and buildings. Some were still without power weeks later. Tragically a farmer was killed near Mirboo North arising from the tornado. We assume that any coroners inquiry will investigate what impact the loss of power and telecommunications had on that tragedy and if it was avoidable. It was less than 4 years ago when we lost a local Wonthaggi firey Bill Slade, fighting the East Gippsland bushfires. We know and understand the trauma for that farmer's family and the general Mirboo North community.

We are certainly aware of other near misses arising from the tornado and are surprised that there was only one death from this emergency.

We can relate serious instances such as where a Philip Island blind resident had no power, no telephone or people contact for 4 days. In another incident a sick/ pregnant woman had to be ferried from Wonthaggi to Frankston hospital and had at least 2 seizures on the way. Her children had to be cared for by a stranger, the woman had little English and her husband had to go to hospital with her. The Ambos had limited telecommunications and no power to raise their garage doors and were forced to undertake a lengthy process of raising doors manually by chain.

Community Meetings

Some of our community members attended public meetings like the one in Grantville on March 21 arranged through Councillor [REDACTED] from Bass Coast Shire. Whilst the SES, CFA, Shire, State Government and police were praised, AusNet and Telstra did not come out of it

very well. Since Privatisation , private providers have not performed well in many peoples view. Maximising profits at the expense of the community services. AusNet were represented at the public meetings but Telstra did not turn up, or even apologise.

Community Resilience

On April 29, AusNet undertook an Enforceable Undertaking under Section 54Zd of the Essential Services Commission Act 2001 (Vic). This arose from the inadequate Outage Tracker response by AusNet to the recent Gippsland outage. In this document AusNet acknowledges that up to 255,000 of their customers were impacted by the inadequacy of their service. If we extrapolate these figures we could assume that up to one million people were impacted by the AusNet outage. We believe that inadequate telecommunications also adversely impacted the limitations of Outage Tracker

If I can speak about the Kongwak Community where I serve on the hall committee of management. We are working to be better prepared for future emergencies. To build resilience; as we are convinced that further emergencies are going to occur, due to climate change. We are working with the assistance of the South Gippsland Shire to engage with our community and mitigate against and prepare for expected future severe weather events. eg There is no mains water in Kongwak and so when power went off, the pumps go off. No water for 4 days for 200 residents ! Even more when you consider surrounding farms. We are looking to prioritise our most vulnerable Kongwak residents, via a buddy support system. Hands on actions to enhance preparedness eg. CPR training, use defibrillator, safe use of a small generator and water pump, recovery basics etc.

Arranging lead sessions at our hall; on emergency planning and responses eg SES, CFA, Police, Landcare, Ambos, Shire etc. We are aiming to make our local hall (and the other 47 halls) throughout South Gippsland hubs for people to have a shower, charge their phone, cook a meal, communicate when phones are out . To this end we are looking at a small backup generator, battery DC inverter, CB radio, engine water pump in case of fire, communications tree etc.

There are people here in rural areas who will give you additional advice on what is needed. We feel that this could be covered under the terms of this review. We also note that AusNet has been placed under an "Enforceable Undertaking" by the Essential Services Commission arising out of the February incident and there is provision of money for communities for getting showers etc. AusNet has announced a \$10 Million "Energy Resilience Community Fund". Quote "AusNet will work with regional councils to award grants to provide communities with access to powered facilities to charge devices, shower, make phone calls and access support in further outage cases.'

As a community Kongwak wants to be part of the solution for our residents. We are hoping that \$10 million is enough money to achieve results. We are pleased that the interim report touches on the telecommunications shortcomings. perhaps Telstra and OPTUS could chip in as part of their community service obligations.

Telecommunications

The Federal Government is also running this "Regional Telecommunications Review". We are encouraging all South Gippslanders to provide feedback to this review given the inadequate quality of service provided by our telecommunications networks during this emergency. Regretably face to face meetings have been held in northern Victoria and not in Gippsland to the best of our knowledge. However South Gippsland residents can still undertake on line submissions. During the tornado, no phones, no internet, etc. Bass Coast Shire was on OPTUS and you could not contact the Shire.

So much for back up networks when one network goes down, emergency calls should have reverted to another network. Kongwak's public telephone simply did not work. No power meant no mobile telephone towers functioning, no back up power in this age of solar and batteries. Having worked in telecommunications for 40 years, I know something about back up systems. Much of this back up research work was undertaken by Telstra at its facility in Kernot South Gippsland. This backuo failure, was unacceptable. At a time when

Telstra's performance in an emergency was deemed to show major shortcomings, they have just put off 3,000 staff. As the Treasurer Jim Chalmers stated 'this means less services.'

At the most recent public meeting held at Mirboo North on July 17, the Victorian Government's Network Outage Review Panel recommended telecommunications enhancements as follows...

"The Victorian Government advocate for stronger telecommunications service reliability outcomes from the Australian Government and associated telecommunications reviews."

"Government and Industry responsible for telecommunications services ensure that there are appropriate arrangements for continued provision of services for 72 hours without network power supply."

"Telecommunications network providers to share-and keep current-information about their sites to enable more effective planning with distribution businesses and a faster emergency response."

"Enhance existing critical infrastructure forums to support coordinated emergency management planning and exercising of distribution businesses and critical infrastructure providers."

Regretably again Telstra did not attend this important community meeting.

In closing can I quote from a new report "Too Close To Home" by "Emergency Leaders For Climate Action"; led by former Commissioner of Fire & Rescue NSW Greg Mullins AO. He said "more investment into community preparedness is critical."



