



Energy and Water Ombudsman (Victoria)

Resolving your electricity, gas & water complaints. Independently.

2 October 2009

Ms Khayen Prentice
Essential Services Commission
2nd Floor, 35 Spring Street
MELBOURNE VIC 3000

By email: khayen.prentice@esc.vic.gov.au

Dear Ms Prentice

The Energy and Water Ombudsman (Victoria) (EWOV) thanks you for the opportunity to comment on its Issues Paper: Electricity Distributors' Communications in Extreme Supply Events (the Issues Paper).

EWOV's interest in making comment on the Issues Paper is based on its experience of complaints about distributors' communications in extreme supply events, and the main point we wish to make is that we have seen an improvement in distributors' communications, as evidenced by the number and nature of complaints, since the extreme events of 2006.

Between 7 February and 28 February 2009, EWOV only received seven complaints that were allocated to the issue category of supply>unplanned outage >information /notice. Of those seven, only three raised issues relevant to the outages that were the result of bushfires:

- one customer reported that his retailer said there were no outages in his area
- one customer was unhappy that the recorded message was not up-to-date
- the third customer had called his retailer's fault line (not realising that this took him through to the distributor) and received incorrect information as to who his distributor was. He was concerned that this faults line could result in wasted time in a life threatening emergency.

This is in contrast to the situation in late January 2006 when EWOV received 24 complaints specifically related to information and communication. It is particularly worth noticing that in February 2009 we did not receive any complaints about not being able to get through to the distributors' call centres. We conclude from this that there have been significant improvements in distributor communications since 2006, although the significant media focus on extreme weather events in February 2009 may have been a contributing factor.

Single industry spokesperson

EWOV's complaint experience does not enable us to comment on this aspect of the Issues Paper, but as a matter of principle, we agree with the proposition that there is advantage in a single industry spokesperson where unplanned outages extend across more than one distribution area and there is the prospect of lengthy restoration times affecting a large number of customers.

Support agencies advice where customers are off supply for more than 24 hours

EWOV's complaint experience only allows us to make limited comment on this aspect of the Issues Paper. In February 2009 we received only two complaints that were allocated to the issue category of supply>unplanned outage>health and safety. In one case a customer was concerned that load shedding should not apply to him because he had asthma and in the other case a power outage had lasted 17 hours, adversely affecting the customer's son who has a chronic medical condition requiring air conditioning.

The reality is that vulnerable people cannot be protected from unplanned power outages; they can only be prepared and assisted with the effects. We welcome the initiatives of the Departments of Human Services and Health and of the local councils to provide care and outreach to vulnerable people in summer power outages.

EWOV cannot see that there are disadvantages in distributors being required to advise the Departments of Human Services and of Health of all energy supply outages longer than 24 hours in duration within their distribution area.

EWOV also notes that Telstra has undertaken significant work on a Priority Service Register and that there may be opportunity for the energy industry to take advantage of what Telstra has learnt in the process of developing the Register and setting up processes for its operation.

Outage notifications by distributors to customers

EWOV strongly agrees that there is a need for customers to have greater visibility and knowledge of their local distributor. Explaining the roles of the retailer and the distributor and differentiating between them is something we have to do very frequently. We support the name of the distributor appearing on bills and the faults line being identified as a distributor number, not a retailer one. We see benefits from this not only in the instance of power outages, but across a broad range of customer interactions with the energy industry.

All of the points the Minister has particularly raised with the ESC in this context have merit and we note the steps the distributors have already taken to implement some of all of them. There would be advantages in a unified approach so that all distributors have the same capabilities.

Distributor call centre service standards

It is important to note, as we have already done, that there has been a significant improvement in distributor call centre service standards. Given that improvement,

EWOV considers that it is appropriate to develop service standards that would apply in extreme events and which would not be as demanding as the ordinary service standards. Those service standards could be related to the standards currently being achieved by distributors' call centres so that they would be an incentive for the distributors to continue to achieve at least those current standards. Achievement against those service standards should be publicly released by the Australian Energy Regulator.

If there is other information from our complaints data that would assist the ESC in considering this matter, EWOV would be happy to help. We hope the above comments, although limited in scope, are of assistance. If there are queries or you would like further information, please contact Frances Wood, Manager Public Affairs and Policy, on (03) 9649 7599 or at frances.wood@ewov.com.au.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Janine Young". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Janine Young
Deputy Ombudsman
Energy and Water Ombudsman (Victoria)