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**THE LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY FOR THE
AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY**

**REPORT NO. 7 OF THE STANDING COMMITTEE ON HEALTH AND COMMUNITY WELLBEING
INQUIRY INTO THE WEST BELCONNEN SUPERCELL THUNDERSTORM**

GOVERNMENT RESPONSE

**Presented by
Mick Gentleman MLA
Minister for Police and Emergency Services
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Summary

The ACT Government welcomes the opportunity to provide a response to the Report on the Inquiry into the West Belconnen Supercell Thunderstorm (the Report), arising from the Standing Committee on Health and Community Wellbeing.

The ACT Government recognises that it is critical to observe lessons and ensure that a culture of continual improvement is enabled to ensure effective emergency response and recovery. A whole of government After Action Review (AAR) undertaken in February 2022 and the recommendations arising from the Committee's Report provide solid foundations for identifying and progressing areas of improvement in the way in which the ACT Government mitigates, prepares for, responds to, and recovers from natural disasters, in close partnership with our communities.

Of the 15 recommendations made by the Committee, three are existing government policy, three have been agreed, one has been agreed in principle and eight have been noted.

Introduction

The storm that impacted the ACT on Monday 3 January 2022 was the most significant weather-related event to face the ACT since the Black Summer Bushfire of 2019-20 and the hailstorm of 2020.

The ACTSES received a total of 1023 requests for assistance (RFAs) from the storm. The RFAs were predominantly for fallen trees and branches on both private and public land including numerous blocked roadways, leaking roofs with water coming into homes and minor localised flooding. Further impacts from fallen trees and branches resulted in significant damage to the overhead low-voltage (240V) electricity network in the Belconnen area. Evoenergy received over 300 reports of incidents affecting the network resulting in over 80 outages. Power outages impacted over 21,000 customers at the height of the storm and were gradually restored by Evoenergy over the following week. 680 customers were without power for longer than four days.

The whole of government response to the storm included resources from the ACTSES, ACT Rural Fire Service and ACT Fire & Rescue, alongside Transport Canberra and City Services and the Environment, Planning and Sustainable Development Directorate. A Community Information Hub was established at the ACT Rural Fire Service Molonglo Brigade station to provide emergency relief services, staffed by the Emergency Service Agency (ESA) and staff from the Community Services Directorate, supported by the Canberra Relief Network.

The ACT Recovery Committee, a subcommittee of SEMSOG, met on 5 January to begin planning for the medium to long term recovery from the storm. Immediate relief and recovery priorities were identified including making safe fallen trees and branches and undertaking temporary repairs to damaged residences, restoration of electricity, removing debris from roads and driveways to restore traffic and transport networks, and providing a location at which the community could charge electronic devices, dispose of food waste, and receive ice (the Community Information Hub).

Following the storm, a range of operational AARs were conducted by ESA, including a whole of government AAR co-facilitated by the Security and Emergency Management Division of the Justice and Community Safety Directorate, to inform broader response and recovery learnings.

A range of observations and insights were recorded from these AARs that will inform opportunity for further exploration for improvements in emergency management and recovery operations.

Key learnings included:

- a) Good, shared understanding of the impact and goal/outcomes for the response;
- b) Strong collaboration across response agencies, whole-of-government (ECC) and public information (PICC);
- c) Positive public information response across social media, 'traditional' media, and the Community Information Hub as a whole of government effort;
- d) Preparedness ahead of the High-Risk Weather Season improved the ability of ESA to coordinate an effective short and medium term response, and transition to recovery; and

- e) Stronger impact intelligence, particularly in the early response, would provide a more effective appreciation of the impacts and complexity of an emergency, to enable a broader response earlier.

ACT Government Response to Recommendations

Recommendation 1

The Committee recommends that the ACT Government undertakes a gap analysis of communication with affected residents following emergencies.

Agreed.

CMTEDD Communications and Engagement (when activated as the PICC) in consultation with ESA or the relevant agency, will undertake a review of communications activity following the deactivation of the Public Information Coordination Centre (PICC) as is required in the Community Communication and Information Plan (CCIP). Lessons learnt will be incorporated into subsequent whole of government emergency communication planning as appropriate.

Any relevant information from the review would also be shared with the relevant directorates responsible for the recovery phase.

Recommendation 2

The Committee recommends that the ACT Government more clearly communicate the purpose of and intended users of emergency hubs in disasters.

Agreed.

CMTEDD Communications and Engagement (when activated as the PICC) will work with the lead response agency to promote emergency hubs, if applicable, on all available channels including the services available at the Hub, eligibility to access the Hub and any restrictions that might apply.

Recommendation 3

The Committee recommends that Evoenergy increase its minimum staffing levels over holiday periods.

Noted.

Evoenergy is part of the ActewAGL Partnership, which operates and maintains the Territory's electricity and gas distribution network. As the Partnership is 50/50 between the Territory through its ownership of Icon Water Ltd and Jemena Networks (ACT) Pty Ltd, the ACT Government cannot direct Evoenergy. However, the ACT Government has requested Evoenergy to consider the matters set out in the Recommendation and Evoenergy has provided the following response:

Evoenergy has a range of resourcing options available to support an agile response to emergency events. These include an on-call roster to ramp-up internal workforce and reciprocal support

arrangements in place with interstate electricity distributors when resourcing requirements exceed the core Evoenergy workforce.

Evoenergy reviews the effectiveness of responses following major events as part of a continuous improvement framework with consideration of the safety and needs of both the community and the Evoenergy workforce.

Recommendation 4

The Committee recommends that Evoenergy develop an improved communications system that provides a regularly updated priority work list and regularly updated 'place in queue' advice to callers seeking a response to a major power outage issue.

Noted.

While the ACT Government cannot direct Evoenergy, as set out in Recommendation 3, the Territory has requested Evoenergy consider the matters set out in the Recommendation and Evoenergy has provided the following response:

Evoenergy acknowledges the feedback provided by the community and recognises the criticality of communication during emergency events. Evoenergy have commenced updates to our communication systems and processes to enable more effective communication, including SMS, telephone, and social media, with enhancements due to be completed within this financial year (2022-23).

Recommendation 5

The Committee recommends that with respect to privacy law and associated ethical protocols, Evoenergy establish a vulnerable persons list similar to the life support equipment register to support appropriate liaison with community organisations that may be able to offer direct assistance to persons on that list.

Noted.

While the ACT Government cannot direct Evoenergy, as set out in Recommendation 3, the Territory has requested Evoenergy to consider the Recommendation and Evoenergy has provided the following response:

Evoenergy considers this recommendation to be outside the responsibilities of an electricity distributor.

During a power outage, Evoenergy's customer support is necessarily focussed upon those who rely on the supply of electricity for the operation of personal life-saving equipment.

The National Electricity Customer Framework details the rules and laws Evoenergy must comply with. This includes maintaining a list of customers registered as requiring life support equipment to ensure appropriate notification and support for these customers in their preparations, including having emergency management plans to enact during any power outage. Evoenergy does not have access to personal information about community members who may have vulnerabilities outside this critical, regulated framework.

The ACT Government agrees with the principle of having systems to identify people with vulnerabilities during the response to and recovery from emergencies.

The establishment of such a list needs to consider expectations it may set and does not replace the need for individuals to complete their own emergency planning.

The ACT Government is participating in national work being undertaken in this area which seeks to address the Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements recommendation regarding appropriate sharing of personal information (Recommendation 22.2). This includes the:

- 'Tell us once' project (National Emergency Management Agency)
- National Data Sharing Work Program - to ensure appropriate gathering and sharing of personal information of individuals affected by natural disasters for recovery purposes between levels of government (Data and Digital Ministers).

Recommendation 6

The Committee recommends that Evoenergy be listed as a territory owned corporation in the Territory-owned Corporations Act 1990, for their annual reports to be considered by Legislative Assembly Committees during yearly annual and financial reports inquiries.

Noted.

As outlined in the response to Recommendation 3, the Territory does not control Evoenergy. Accordingly, Evoenergy cannot be subject to the Territory-owned Corporations 1990.

Recommendation 7

The Committee recommends that the Consumer Protection Code for the ACT be amended to add provisions for penalties to utility service providers that fail to meet service reliability targets, including compensation to affected consumers.

Noted.

The Consumer Protection Code (CPC) provides an incentive for utility service providers to meet service reliability targets, by requiring the provider to pay rebates to customers, through failure to

meet a target. The requirement to pay rebates does not apply when there is a 'major event'; broadly a rare event where the nature of the damage from the event causes significant widespread damage that vastly exceeds the boundaries for normal reliability.

Penalties related to failure to meet service reliability targets exist within Evoenergy's regulated operating environment and are administered by the Australian Government as the Australian Energy Regulator. Claims for compensation are investigated and assessed on a case-by-case basis.

Recommendation 8

The Committee recommends that the ACT Government consider the appropriateness of tree species as part of future urban planting with regard to risk of damage from severe weather events.

Existing Government Policy.

Transport Canberra and City Services Directorate (TCCS) routinely reviews which species are appropriate to be retained or added on to the Territory's Municipal Infrastructure Standards Part 25 Plant Species for Urban Landscapes Project list. MIS 25 has been formally reviewed on three occasions in the last ten years by a combination of independent experts and by practitioners in TCCS.

Selection of the right species to plant in any given location considers such factors as the eventual mature size of the tree, climatic requirements (e.g. frost and drought tolerance), locality limitations, local drainage and soil characteristics and even if the tree may give rise to allergies in humans, in addition to many other considerations.

Trees protect infrastructure by mitigating the impact of strong winds. While there was significant tree damage experienced in the Belconnen storms, a far higher rate of infrastructure damage may have been experienced in a lower canopy cover environment. In a Canadian study, removing all the trees around homes resulted in a doubling of wind speed and increased wind pressure exposure to dwellings¹.

Dr Greg Moore, an arboriculturist at the University of Melbourne, has stated that Eucalypts are not more prone to fail than other species, it's just there are many more of them in our environment. Factors other than the species of the tree are likely to play a much more significant role in determining tree failure rates such as saturated soils combined with high wind events as well as the overall health of the tree².

¹ M.G. Giomettoa, Christen, P.E. Egli, M.F. Schmid, R.T. Tooke, N.C. Coops, M.B. Parlange, Effects of trees on mean wind, turbulence and momentum exchange within and above a real urban environment, Advances in Water Resources, Volume 106, August 2017, Pages 154-168.

² Dr G. Moore, Eucalypts in a time of climate change, ABC Radio National, Broadcast Sat 19 Jun 2021 at 9:20am, available at <https://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/blueprintforliving/blueprint-living-with-eucalypts-amid-climate-change-greg-moore/13395822>

Recommendation 9

The Committee recommends that the ACT Government review the criteria impacting removal of potentially hazardous trees or branches that threaten infrastructure.

Agreed in Principle.

TCCS employs a number of staff and contractors trained and practiced in assessing the health of a variety of tree species. Staff apply a number of proven criteria that provide an excellent indicator to the health of the tree, ranging from tree age estimates, assessment of aspects of tree health through to growth habit elements, and growing media factors (e.g. soil types, compaction). These indicators are regularly field tested, reviewed and updated, and any industry insights applied, to ensure that arborists are able to make an accurate assessment of tree health.

Recommendation 10

The Committee recommends that the ACT Government work with Evoenergy to more closely align the definition of a potential hazardous tree to permit action, by either party, to reduce the threat of damage to infrastructure.

Agreed.

TCCS retains a good working relationship with Evoenergy and currently shares skills and experiences whenever relevant. It is important to note that whilst an absolute definition of a hazardous tree can at times be a difficult task, there are a number of criteria that can be assessed to determine the relative hazard posed by a tree. Practitioners in both agencies have a shared understanding of these criteria.

Recommendation 11

The Committee recommends that the ACT Government consider providing assistance to those residents experiencing challenges of difficulties in removing debris from their property after a severe storm event.

Existing Government Policy.

Following a significant natural disaster, there is a range of financial assistance that can be made available through the ACT or Australian Governments, under Disaster Recovery Funding Arrangements.

The ACT Government is responsible for ensuring that adequate measures are taken to prevent, prepare for, respond to, and assist recovery from natural disasters and other emergencies. To support relief and recovery, the ACT Government provides a diverse range of financial and non-

financial assistance measures through the ACT Recovery Sub-Plan and Disaster Assistance Guidelines.

In addition to assistance from the ACT Government, the Australian Government provides various recovery assistance measures following disasters. People affected by a disaster could expect to receive both Australian and ACT Government assistance.

The purpose of these Guidelines is to outline assistance measures available to aid immediate recovery from a disaster. Disaster assistance, coupled with recovery services, charitable contributions, non-profit and community efforts, and the existing social safety net, helps protect vulnerable people, maintains social cohesion, and supports affected individuals, organisations and businesses.

Government assistance is not intended as a substitute for appropriate insurance arrangements or other appropriate strategies for disaster mitigation. Insurance arrangements are the most important provider of financial assistance following a disaster. Households, organisations and businesses are taking serious risks if they choose to not insure, as assistance will only be available for eligible events.

The principles that inform these Guidelines are:

- Assistance is an emergency helping hand for those in need, rather than to provide compensation for losses or restore lifestyles to their pre-disaster standard;
- Disaster assistance should complement and provide incentive, wherever possible, to promote the principle of resilience; and
- Recovery is a shared responsibility. Assistance is not to supplant, or operate as a disincentive for, self-help by way of insurance arrangements and/or other appropriate strategies for disaster mitigation.

Throughout 2022, the ACT Disaster Assistance Guidelines have been reviewed to recognise changes to the Australian Government Recovery Arrangements that improve the accessibility of financial assistance measures to affected communities. This ACT Government will continue to improve Disaster Assistance Guidelines to ensure that the most appropriate assistance measures are available for implementation immediately following a disaster.

Recommendation 12

The Committee recommends that the activities of the ACT Community Recovery Sub Committee be reviewed to achieve more co-ordinated outcomes from severe weather events whereby all parties seek to contribute their relevant expertise.

Existing Government Policy.

The ACT Recovery Committee is undertaking a significant review process to ensure that the ACT Government's recovery arrangements remain contemporary, consistent with the arrangements of other jurisdictions, and that areas of best practice in recovery are identified and adapted for the ACT. This process commenced in July 2022.

The ACT Recovery Committee has undertaken a comprehensive preparedness program in advance of the High-Risk Weather Season 2022/23. The ACT Recovery Plan has been reviewed to ensure consistency with changes made to the ACT *Emergencies Act* (2004), ACT Emergency Plan and Australian Government recovery arrangements. A suite of governance and process documents have been developed to better guide a coordinated whole of government response in recovery, and an operational recovery capability is being developed to better support ACT communities in the weeks and months following a significant emergency.

Recommendation 13

The Committee recommends that the ACT Government reviews the process of integration of all Directorates and services to respond more effectively to severe weather events.

Noted.

The Emergency Coordination Centre (ECC), established under the ACT Emergency Plan, is the mechanism to support the operations of the lead response agency during and following an emergency. The ECC enables the integration of all Directorates and key external stakeholders, facilitating a whole of government response to an emergency.

A review of the response to this emergency event has been undertaken by the ACT Government. After action reviews of all emergencies occur as a part of the continuous improvement cycle, providing the opportunity to improve organisational capacity, capability, and individual learnings. Further, the ESA's Collective Training and Exercise Program supports cross-government training and exercises.

Recommendation 14

The Committee recommends that the role of the Multi-Hazard Advisory Council be reviewed to determine how outcomes could be improved and to assess the valuable contributions of community groups and services.

Noted.

Recent amendments to the Emergencies Act 2004, included a review of the role of the former ACT Bushfire Council, now known as the ACT Multi Hazard Advisory Council.

The ACT Multi Hazard Advisory Council is a ministerial advisory council. Members provide the Minister for Police and Emergency Services and Government with advice relating to all natural disasters. Members possess a diversity of technical skills and can draw upon their diverse perspectives and experiences in providing advice. The Council works with relevant ACT Government agencies responsible for planning, preparedness, and response to natural hazards in addition to considering community expectations and engagement in these areas. The Minister has the discretion to extend a standing invitation to additional people to attend Council meetings to advise Council on issues. These people may be invited due to their representation of peak bodies within the ACT from a range of diverse backgrounds.

Recommendation 15

The Committee recommends that the Emergencies Act 2004 be amended to allow for suitably qualified and available support organisations to be included in the ACT Emergency Plan.

Noted.

Section 61 of the Emergencies Act 2004 makes provision for a person to apply to the Minister for approval to provide ambulance, emergency, firefighting, or rescue services.

Further, an Emergency Controller (if appointed) has the powers to “coordinate the disposition of other resources to manage the emergency” (Emergencies Act 2004 S 150B (1b)).

There is also provision in the Act for the Commissioner to appoint a person as an emergency services support volunteer (Emergencies Act 2004 S 59CA).

Conclusion

The ACT Government recognises the work of our frontline responders and staff who were involved in the response and recovery efforts and extends its sincere thanks for all that they do to keep Canberra safe.

The ACT Government recognises that emergencies are becoming more frequent and more intense, driven by our changing climate. Following all significant emergencies, the ACT Government has a track record of evaluating responses and integrating learnings into a continual improvement cycle to ensure that we are recognising successes and observing where improvements can be made. This is true of the 3 January 2022 storm. Many of the recommendations within the Standing Committee Report speak to the increasing focus on whole of community resilience to natural disasters, and the partnerships developed between government and communities to understand and reduce risks in our urban environment . Understanding risks through enhanced intelligence, communicating those risks, creating effective partnerships across government and communities,

and supporting improved capabilities, all speak to a broader level of disaster resilience that can help reduce known risks and actively prepare both government and communities for more frequent and severe disasters.