



LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY
FOR THE AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY

STANDING COMMITTEE ON HEALTH AND COMMUNITY WELLBEING
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Submission Cover Sheet

Inquiry into West Belconnen
supercell thunderstorm

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The Chairman
ACT Legislative Assembly Committee on Health and Community Wellbeing

Submission – Inquiry into the West Belconnen supercell thunderstorm

My wife and I live at [REDACTED], one of the properties impacted by the storm on 3 January. We lost power, and it took four days to be restored, far longer than for any other power outage that occurred in the 43 years we have lived at this address.

The power outage

The response by EvoEnergy to the loss of power due to this storm cost us both inconvenience and money. It was noteworthy for the time taken, and the poor messaging.

When the storm occurred on the late afternoon of 3 January, our power supply flickered a few times, but held up. More than four hours later, at 10.15pm, it went off – I assume by human intervention, since the storm had long since passed on. We confidently expected that it would be restored by next morning.

We had no power next morning, and a phone call to EvoEnergy elicited the information that they were working on the problem. My recollection is that no estimate was given of the expected time of power restoration.

When I called again some hours later, I had to press to speak to a supervisor before I was given access to real information, and an estimate of up to two days to restore power. We judged we could survive two days keeping freezer and fridge closed as much as possible, and running down our hot water tank.

When I next contacted EvoEnergy's information line on the afternoon of 5 January, around the deadline previously given for restoration of power, I learned that the estimate had been changed to Sunday 9th, six days after it went off. Again no reason was given.

By this time our freezers were thawing and our hot water was running out. On the following morning, Thursday 7th, we moved the more valuable contents of our freezers to freezers offered by friends at their homes in Aranda and Hawker. Then we checked into the Belconnen Way Hotel for the remaining duration of the power outage.

While shopping at the Hawker shopping centre on Thursday 7th I noted more than one EvoEnergy crew purchasing coffee during what looked like a break. That gave me the impression that the work crews were not possessed of the same urgency I saw in restoring power to my part of Hawker.

Late on the afternoon of Friday 8th we learned from neighbours that power had just been restored, making a total outage of nearly four days. This was two days sooner than the last estimate I had been given. I confirmed this information on the EvoEnergy phone line, and we checked out of the motel the following morning and returned home.

At no time during this period of 3-8 January did EvoEnergy tell me

- why my power had been turned off,
- what was the precise problem they were dealing with,
- what resources they had on the job, and what hours they were working,
- on what basis they estimated the various dates and times of power restoration, and
- why those estimates had to be adjusted.

In fact I got more information from other residents than from EvoEnergy. This included the actual location of the problem and that power had been restored.

The cleanup

The morning after the storm, I went for my usual walk around the suburb. It looked like a war zone, with trees down, roads blocked (with downed power lines) and part-blocked (where emergency services had moved parts of fallen trees to open one lane). There were damaged homes, smashed cars, fallen trees and branches, and piles of debris.

The emergency services had performed an outstanding job overnight, working to clear roads and deal with damaged houses and other emergencies.

This is where the laudable response finished, however. Fallen trees on nature strips and in parks remained in place for at least a month before ACT government crews finally arrived to deal with them. Even then they did not finish the job; that took nearly three months.

As if to excuse this delay, government-authorised corflutes appeared around the suburb claiming that the government was addressing the cleanup. Evidence was hard to see.

Conclusion

This was a violent and damaging storm event, apparently not predicted fully by the Bureau of Meteorology. Its worst effects were however relatively localised, with the worst impact in Hawker.

The response, by EvoEnergy and the ACT government, was mixed. Immediate action by emergency services was effective, but the follow-up took far too long and no information was given to residents. EvoEnergy distinguished itself by providing as little information as possible, thereby adding to the frustration felt by residents. It took too long to restore power, and generally performed poorly.



B S Middleton

20 April 2022