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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Select Committee on Health and Community Wellbeing

Inquiry into the West Belconnen supercell thunderstorm

Evoenergy

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Background information

The severe storm that swept through north-western Canberra on Monday 3 January 2022 at approximately 17:00 caused serious and extensive damage to Evoenergy's overhead low-voltage network assets as well as internal customer supply equipment, particularly in the suburbs in the Molonglo Valley, Belconnen, and Gungahlin districts.

The scale of the damage caused by this storm to our overhead electricity network was equivalent to the damage of the 2003 bushfires. Damage from the storm resulted in the loss of electricity supply for more than 21,000 of our customers.

Within the first few hours of the storm and into the night, Evoenergy crews restored electricity supply to more than 18,000 customers. During the following six days, supply was gradually restored to all customers initially impacted, with the exception of a small number of customers that required private contractors to repair damage to their electricity network point of attachment.

More than 550 electrical assets were damaged, 190 service lines replaced, 50 powerlines restrung, 20 cross arms replaced, and 11 power poles replaced. With the assistance of Endeavour Energy, Evoenergy crews worked safely to return supply to our customers and replace damaged assets.

Community engagement and communication

Opportunities to improve the way Evoenergy responds during storm events in the future include our ability to provide more timely, frequent and effective communications to our customers. This includes improving the different options customers can interact with during outages, including the self-service interactive outage map and through customer Contact Centre capabilities.

- During the storm response, our staff represented Evoenergy within the Emergency Services Agency's Fairbairn facility, actively contributing to the multi-agency operational response and coordinating activities.
- Evoenergy representatives attended the ESA Community Hub in Higgins to provide support and advice to customers who had not yet had their power restored.
- Over the course of the week, we received 4,976 calls to our 24-hour Faults & Emergencies Contact Centre (13 10 93), with over 300 separate incidents including 130 vegetation related incidents. This represents a 1,200% increase in our average weekly call volumes (normally around 380 calls/week) when compared to 2021.
- Evoenergy used social media channels to respond to more than 300 customer enquiries and proactively communicate to the Canberra community about our storm response with updates and expected times of restoration.
- Evoenergy had significant media engagement over the course of the storm response with media releases distributed, spokespeople interviews and verbal and written updates provided to journalists and producers multiple times a day.
- Evoenergy was committed to supporting and connecting with our most vulnerable customers, prioritising calls to those registered for life support equipment that were without power.

Storm review

In line with our commitment to continuous improvement, we have undertaken a review of our response to the storm, to identify what worked well and identify opportunities for improvement. This review sought feedback and insights from our workers within Evoenergy and contractors involved in the storm response. We also approached 2,500 Belconnen residents that experienced an outage following the storm, with a survey to share their feedback.

Climate change and net zero

The intensity and frequency of severe storm events is increasing, and we are committed to ensuring that we can adapt and respond effectively to our changing climate and environment. Through our sustainability strategy, we're committed to contributing to the mitigation and adaptation toward the effects of climate change.

This includes working with climate science experts and the broader energy industry to understand how to balance strategies for investment in preventative asset management with reactive emergency network repairs, to ensure ongoing reliability and affordability for customers. Ongoing collaboration with fellow energy distributors on network resilience will ensure we maintain our focus on customer and community needs as we respond and adapt our network and operations to our changing climate. Evoenergy's strategic initiatives planning for our net zero carbon future, positive customer experiences and working our assets and networks smarter all recognise the changing climate and our role in responding and adapting to it.

We're partnering with the energy industry to learn more about climate change and how we need to respond, including collaborative research specific to industry risks, and consultation with the community. This will help industry understand how we can best support our customers and community in planning and adapting our network for the effects of climate change over the next 10 years. This includes asset management, reactive emergency network management, and the role we play to ensure the reliability of other essential services, such as water and sewerage, telecommunications, and transport.

Evoenergy recommendations

We're committed to working with the ACT Government and emergency support agencies to effectively collaborate on managing the risk of major damage to our network through three key strategies outlined below:

- **Prevention** – Most of the damage we experienced to the distribution network during this storm event was due to fallen trees and tree branches bringing down powerlines, poles, and other electricity distribution assets. Evoenergy knows that Canberra our bush capital is recognised for its native trees, however trees present a major risk to our overhead network assets. Evoenergy has an inspection program to identify vegetation that is encroaching the minimum clearances to the powerline which are set by the *Utilities (Technical Regulation) Act 2014*.

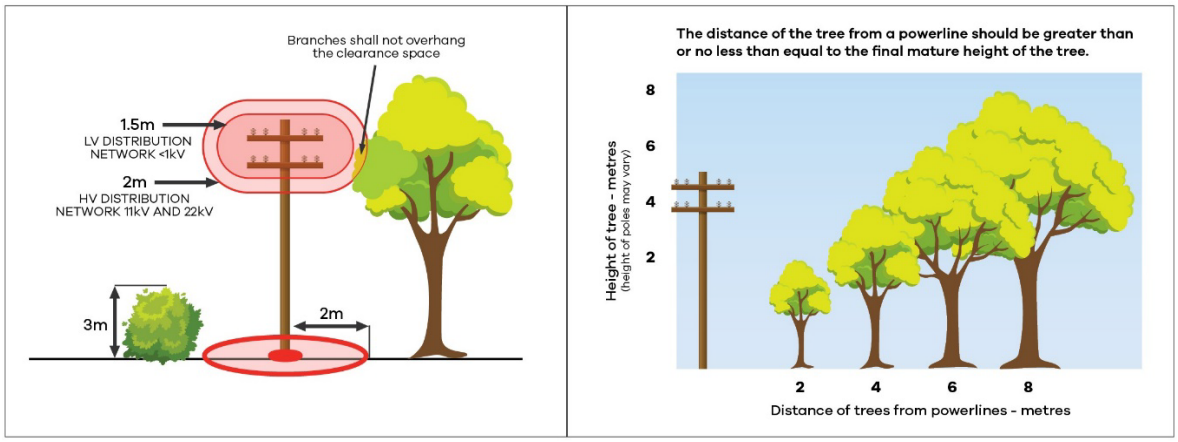
  In the ACT, private landholders are responsible for ensuring all trees and vegetation on their property are kept clear from poles, powerlines and all other network infrastructure (to a minimum 1.0m radius from service lines and a 1.5m radius from low voltage powerlines and 2.0m from high voltage powerlines), however enforcing this requirement is a challenge. We would welcome a partnership with the ACT

Government Transport Canberra & City Services to work with the community to educate about the benefits of proactive vegetation management.

Under the Utilities Technical Regulation Electricity Powerline Vegetation Management Code) Approval 2018, Evoenergy is obliged to both inspect and maintain these minimum clearances of vegetation from powerlines in Territory unleased land and the rural environment. This includes trees owned by Transport Canberra and City Services or situated in a Canberra Nature Park or National Capital Authority land and these trees are regulated by the ACT Conservator for Flora and Fauna and National Capital Authority.

It is noteworthy that a tree that encroaches the minimum clearances can be pruned such that no more than 30% of the tree canopy may be removed in a single pruning.

Many trees that have been planted in line with a power easement are of a species that grow considerable higher, with half of the canopy overhanging the lines. Often you will see these trees have needed to be pruned such that they look sliced straight down the middle, but ideally, they would be replaced with a more suitable species or removed entirely. The figure below demonstrates the comparison between current legislation and the ideal clearances from powerlines to ensure minimal impact of vegetation on the safe and reliable management of the electricity network.



Evoenergy also maintains a hazard tree register where we are able to identify trees that are in poor health, and the size and proximity of the trees are too close to the lines, and these are ear-marked for removal; with subsequent approval sought by the Conservator.

At this stage, moving our overhead electricity network underground is not possible due to its location and the significant cost associated with moving it (a cost that would be passed through to consumers via the network charges on their electricity bill).

- **Detection** – We've received extensive feedback from residents impacted by the storm that when we detect a power interruption within our network they are notified via SMS. We've heard this feedback and we're in the process of upgrading our systems to introduce outage SMS to ensure Canberrans have the latest up to date information about the power at their property readily available.
- **Response** – We are committed to continue to review and improve how we respond to storms, including proactively communicating with those affected by power outages, and ensuring we're aligned with other agencies in our approach to prioritise public safety before restoring power supply. We've taken an action following our post incident review to evaluate the accreditation requirements for the ACT State Emergency Service to allow them to work near our network safely during storm

events, to assist with tree clearing. If adopted, this arrangement could provide quicker access to property for our crews to repair network damage and restore power supply.

Closing comments

Evoenergy is committed to continuing to provide safe and reliable energy to Canberra and the region. We look forward to the outcomes of the inquiry and working with ACT Government and emergency support agencies as well as continuing to engage with our customers and community on how we effectively mitigate and adapt to the effects of climate change on our network.