



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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SUBMISSION

Inquiry into the West Belconnen Supercell Thunderstorm

Personal impact and financial cost

- Two large protected trees on my property were severely damaged. Snapped off branches damaged my existing garden as well as some of my neighbour's garden. Much existing garden vegetation was severely stripped by the hailstorm.
- Timber window frames were chipped and paint stripped off by the force of the hail. Repair and repainting needed.
- Loss of power for four days meant I had to discard substantial perishables in the absence of reliable advice of when power was likely to be restored.
- Arborist tree pruning of broken trees and removal of detritus cost around \$1600. Food value loss around \$100 - \$200.

Inadequate information to residents following the storm

The large exotic conifer (no doubt a protected tree) in an [REDACTED] backyard that dropped a branch on the power lines, towered well above the power lines. It knocked out power to me and a relatively small group of homes in [REDACTED] Streets. The restoration job was, I suspect, put into a lower priority for that reason.

My property lost power for around 4 days. A major concern was the inability of the power supplier, Evoenergy, to communicate when power was likely to be restored. It was difficult to contact Evoenergy by phone, and when contact was made, the advice was along the lines of "we're doing our best, it's a massive job, our teams are on the job, etc." Despite many calls, we received no clear advice on where we stood on the jobs list and when it might be attended to.

On Friday 7 January, 4 days after the storm, we received a message from Evoenergy that power would be back that afternoon. This didn't happen. Another subsequent message said if power was not on, to call back. Then we were told it would be back on Sunday 9 January. Based on this advice, we discarded all perishables (as it turns out, unnecessarily). We then spoke to some powerline workers in our street who said electricity would be restored in the evening of 7 January and it was.

Need to address problems caused by large trees on or near residential properties and powerlines

This Inquiry should focus not only on matters related to recovery, but also on prevention of damage from future severe storms. Scientific research suggests that Australia can expect more frequent intense damaging storms due to climate change.

If there weren't so many large trees on suburban blocks or near powerlines, the damage would have been much less. Most of the damage to properties and the loss of power appears to have been caused by whole trees or large branches (mostly of eucalypts) falling onto power lines, roads, cars and

houses. The suburb of [REDACTED] has been planted mostly with eucalyptus species, the oldest of which are now around 50 years old and large enough to be a permanent ongoing threat.

The core problem is that these high risk trees (and even large non-natives such as conifers and maples, which are not a part of our natural ecosystems) are given unreasonable protection under ACT Protected Tree legislation. Getting permission to have unwanted, excessively large problematic or dangerous trees removed has proven to be almost impossible in Canberra.

The massive exotic backyard conifer that cut power to my area on 3 January towers well above the height of the powerlines. Half of it has been pruned away leaving an ugly half tree, but remarkably, it is still protected, allowed to stand, waiting for the next storm.

There are many such trees close to power lines around Canberra that are irresponsibly allowed to remain. It is not enough just to prune overhanging branches. It must be assumed that in severe storms, the entire tree could fall and should be removed if it is within falling distance of powerlines. Evoenergy should be mapping such high risk trees over its powerlines, more importantly than its current practice of sending notices to residents to prune if vegetation approaches from below within a couple of metres.

Under current arrangements, the energy provider ends up unfairly carrying much of the community's frustration for power restoration delays, when the root cause of the problem is the ACT Government's Protected Tree legislation and the demonstrated intransigence of ACT Government officials in approving removal of problem trees, despite pleading from the public about the damage they cause. Any reader of the Canberra Times over recent years would empathise with those pleading for removal of trees or requiring costly maintenance, causing damage or presenting risk to their residential properties.

Apart from the recent electricity disruption, issues I have endured from massive trees on immediate neighbouring properties over almost 30 years living in [REDACTED] include:

- A large eucalypt shading my house from morning sun in winter, causing increased heating costs and greenhouse gas emissions.
- Eucalypts harbouring nuisance possums which often defoliate preferred garden trees.
- Possum establishing nest in a wall cavity.
- termite infestations requiring expensive fence replacement.
- roots from neighbouring large trees infesting the garden and lifting concrete driveway.
- blown leaves choking gutters.
- enhanced fire risk from neighbouring large eucalypts during the 2003 bushfires. This is still a risk for suburbs like [REDACTED], on the western edge of the city.

Public versus private costs and benefits of ACT Protected Tree legislation

The fundamental principle that should be considered by this Inquiry is that of private citizens being forced to bear the costs of (often dangerous) legally protected trees deemed a public social good in law. It's an example of the Government "socialising the benefits while privatising the costs."

The costs associated with these protected trees, deemed a public or social good, should not be transferred to the private citizen. If such trees are deemed of public benefit for reasons such as wildlife habitat, aesthetic and social amenity, etc. then Government should bear the cost. Why does the

private (rate paying) citizen have to bear the cost of e.g. termite inspections and damage repair, pruning costs, nuisance possum removals, gutter cleaning, gardens failing due to root invasion, lifted paving and foundations, blocked drains, increased winter heating costs (and associated greenhouse gas emissions) from shading by large evergreens, increased fire hazard from flammable foliage, electricity disruption from tree branches falling on powerlines, etc?

The ACT Government provides or has provided rebates for various matters considered to be environmentally beneficial (e.g. replacement of wood heaters, installation of solar panels). Similar rebates should be considered for costs associated with protected trees on residential properties.

Recommendations for consideration

1. In the event of major power disruptions, energy providers be required to develop a priority list and expected timeline for restoration of power and communicate this to affected residents and businesses.
2. Energy providers to establish emergency quick response hotlines to answer queries from affected consumers with accurate and up to date information so that customers are not left on hold for extended periods waiting to speak to someone.
3. The ACT Protected Tree legislation be reviewed and amended in the context of recent events and the likely increase and intensity of damaging storms. Key issues for review should include:
 - Residents be able to remove any tree on their property that they consider presents a risk to their property without needing to seek approval from any authority.
 - Electricity providers identify potentially dangerous protected trees at risk of falling onto powerlines and that they be removed or pruned at no cost to residents.
 - ACT Government develop a cost rebate scheme if residents are to continue to be forced to privately fund the many costs associated with protected trees on their properties deemed a public good under legislation.

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