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Energy industry developing new response protocols to extreme weather blackouts

Modernisation of Australia's electricity networks will include new industry-wide standards in emergency response to severe weather events, including bushfires and floods.

A major energy conference in Melbourne has been told new emergency response and power restoration procedures are being adopted based on knowledge from recent events, including the extended heatwave and devastating Victorian bushfires of early 2009 and Brisbane floods last year.

Speaking at the Energy 21C conference, Peter Whelan, Manager for Emergency Preparation at Jemena, a Melbourne metropolitan electricity distributor, said networks were also drawing on experience from electricity companies overseas, particularly American States affected by hurricanes.

"We are developing new levels of collaboration with emergency response organisations, including fire and police, and better procedures in communicating with customers," he said.

"People understand that damage will occur to power networks in extreme weather events, but the challenge is to restore supply as quickly as possible recognising priority areas.

"We are developing a triage response in terms of locating damage, identifying the affected assets, and dedicating the necessary resources to ensure repairs in order of priority.

"There are many challenges in this process. Life support technologies are not isolated to major public hospitals. For example, about a third of dialysis machines that are life-saving devices for people with kidney disease, are located in homes or local health clinics.

"Electricity supply companies focus on maintaining supplies for hospitals as a priority. Hence, the ability to meet the demands of homes containing life support equipment creates an increased demand on response capabilities."

Mr Whelan said modern building design with a reliance on air conditioning placed a heavy burden on electricity networks, particularly in heatwave conditions.

In the heatwave of late January 2009, the week preceding the Black Saturday bushfires, peak energy demand reached around seven per cent above the previous all-time record in Victoria.

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- 2 -

Over the next decade, the energy sector will invest billions of dollars modernising network assets to facilitate the transition to lower emission generation and to ensure security and reliability of energy supply

Meanwhile, Australia's energy companies have welcomed an historic agreement between industry, government and unions providing new emergency response training protocols for electricity workers.

The move will create nationally consistent training and greater capacity for energy industry employees to move between States and Territories to perform their duties in crisis situations.

The National Refresher Training Recognition Protocol for Emergency Situations was signed at the Energy 21C conference at the Melbourne Convention and Exhibition Centre on Tuesday 8 September 2009.

Signatories were Martin Ferguson, the Federal Minister for Resources and Energy, George Maltabarow, Chairman of the Energy Networks Association, and Peter Tighe, National Secretary of the Communications Electrical Plumbing Union (CEPU).

Mr Maltabarow said the protocol would ensure that by summer electricity distribution and transmission line workers would have access to nationally consistent refresher training creating a mobile workforce that could respond in emergencies. Over time, the training will extend to a broader range of electricity workers.

The ENA, the peak body representing gas and electricity distribution businesses throughout Australia, has consistently promoted the importance of rapid response and recognition of competencies in emergency situations.

Mr Maltabarow said the National Refresher Training Recognition Protocol for Emergency Situations was a major milestone that would have long-term benefits for the industry and the nation.

"The protocol commits the energy supply industry to a number of identified essential training competencies that will form the basis for longer-term labour mobility and skills," he added.

"It demonstrates the energy industry's willingness to work with unions and government to develop a nationally harmonised approach to achieve industry efficiency, employee and public safety."

Interview:

Peter Whelan is available for interview on (03) 8544 9237 or 0419 384 968