

Australia: Wild storms result in largest-ever blackout in the state of Victoria

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Wild storms in the Australian state of Victoria last week cut the electricity supply to more than 530,000 homes and businesses. Strong winds brought down high-voltage transmission lines and resulted in the automated shutdown of one major power generator. The blackout was the largest in the state's history surpassing the figure of 520,000 customers who lost power during storms in October 2021.

The wild weather also led to widespread damage that is still being assessed. As of yesterday, the state's emergency authorities confirmed the storm destroyed 37 homes, leaving them uninhabitable. In Mirboo North to the southeast of the state capital, Melbourne, dairy farmer Bruce Manintveld, was killed when extreme winds sent a large sheet of metal towards him as he was attempting to herd his cows.

The huge blackout—the second in just over two years—has exposed the fragility of the power system that is both ageing and inadequately maintained. At around 2 p.m. on February 13, high winds brought down six high-voltage transmission towers at Anakie to the west of Melbourne. That event tripped four units at Loy Yang, some 200 kilometres east in the Morwell Valley, and the power loss threw the electricity system out of balance.

As a result, the Australian Energy Market Operator called on the electricity distributor AusNet to cut off power, or load shed, to about 90,000 customers in order to prevent further damage. While power was restored to many of those homes and businesses, more than 12,000km of powerlines and poles were damaged in the storms that brought down a large number of trees.

The distribution networks of AusNet and United Energy were the hardest hit. AusNet, serves outer eastern and outer northern Melbourne, as well as eastern and north-eastern Victoria. It had some 262,601

customers without power on the evening of February 13. United Energy, which covers south-east Melbourne and the Mornington Peninsula, had 134,579 customer outages.

Of the 530,000 customers that initially lost power, 127,743 still had no supply a day later at 5 p.m. on February 14 and 44,000 were still without power at 5 p.m. on February 15. As of this Tuesday, that is a week later, some 2,620 homes and 500 businesses were still without power—the overwhelming majority AusNet customers located in Victoria's east.

The loss of power also impacted mobile phone and internet networks across the state. As of last Thursday, around 230 phone towers were still offline. Mobile phone provider Telstra warned that 22 communities were potentially completely isolated from all public telecommunications and unable to make emergency triple-zero calls.

The triple-zero emergency number and emergency services were overwhelmed by those able to make calls. Based on internal reports, the *Herald Sun* revealed that at one point on February 13, emergency callers had to wait more than a minute to speak to fire services, up to six minutes for police and 23 minutes for the State Emergency Service.

A relief point had to be set up at Mirboo North to provide information, electricity generators and satellite internet for residents who were without power or telecommunications and completely cut off by the storm damage.

Facing a groundswell of anger, the state Labor government has announced an inquiry by a panel of experts. While the terms of reference were not released, the *Age* stated the review will “investigate how the electricity distributors managed the incident and how effective they were at getting power restored quickly.”

APP reported that the review will examine complaints about AusNet's crashed outage website, as well as reports of inconsistent and lacking information and whether homes and businesses could have been reconnected quicker. Energy Minister Lily D'Ambrosio said that the process would copy the review into Victoria's devastating storms in 2021.

The previous report made eight recommendations and 35 sub-recommendations aimed at reducing the likelihood and impact of prolonged power outages. The government, however, did not introduce two recommendations, including the establishment of a regulatory mechanism to push privately-owned distribution companies to create greater resilience in the electricity grid.

One glaring problem with the grid is the state of the high voltage transmission towers. The *Age* reported on a study by AusNet Services in 2020 which showed that 14 percent of the state's 13,000 towers are damaged by rust and that their average age is now about 57 years. Around 8,000 will reach their designed "service life" of 70 years within the next decade.

In addition, the report found 45 transmission towers had been knocked over by extreme wind since 1959, before the six that fell last week. Significantly the rate of these collapses is increasing with 25 of the towers coming down just in the past 15 years.

A separate report by energy analyst Dan Lee said that 1.5 percent of the towers were in poor condition and that the increase in tower collapses since 2020 was due to the combination of "increasing frequency of severe convective winds, and the aging state of transmission structures."

The collapse of the six towers at Anakie last week is a graphic demonstration of the vulnerability of the entire grid. Those towers were inspected in July 2023, just eight months ago, and found to be in "good condition" with only surface rust. That raises further questions about the state of the 86 percent of towers categorised as being in "very good" or "good" condition.

Power production and distribution were privatised in Victoria in the mid-1990s as part of the process of creating an energy market throughout the eastern states to drive down the cost of electricity for big business and open up profitable opportunities for private power generators and distributors like AusNet and United Energy. Thousands of jobs were destroyed.

The private companies maximize profits at the expense of investing in infrastructure to guarantee supply for "extreme" events. The power grid is run on the basis of "breakdown maintenance," where failures are expected and then patched up. Working people have borne the brunt through rising power bills and greater uncertainty in supply.



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