

**Submission  
No 469**

## **INQUIRY INTO THE 2026 SUMMER FIRES ACROSS VICTORIA**

**Organisation:** Powercor

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To the Environment and Planning Committee,

**Subject - Inquiry into the 2026 summer fires across Victoria**

Powercor welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the *Inquiry into the 2026 summer fires across Victoria*.

Powercor operates the electricity distribution network across Melbourne's western suburbs and central and western Victoria. We supply electricity to around 963,000 customers across a network that spans approximately 145,000 square kilometres, covering about two-thirds of the state. We manage a large network that includes 622,000 power poles and 78,000 kilometres of powerlines, most of which are overhead and located in regional and rural areas. Electricity supplied through this network supports households, businesses, emergency services and other critical infrastructure.

This scale and geography mean many of the communities we serve are exposed to extreme weather and bushfire risk.

Our role is to keep the lights on for our customers. The consequences for losing power, particularly during major events such as fires, where people are depending on electricity for communications and water, can be catastrophic. Prolonged power outages can also adversely affect the health and welfare of individuals. A loss of power can mean losing access to air conditioning during hot weather or being unable to run life support equipment that depends on electricity. It's why we invest millions of dollars every year making our network as strong as possible, while also working with communities and organisations to support them build resilience.

We also have a robust emergency response structure that is activated before major weather events, such as we witnessed during the 2026 summer period, that provides well-tested processes and procedures that allow us to respond quickly. We also coordinate with the Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action (DEECA) in their role as the control agency for energy events, as well as work closely with emergency authorities, local governments and other organisations.

The 2026 summer fires were devastating for the communities and people they impacted and we understand for many, these will have long-lasting effects.

For electricity networks, these events showed how complex it can be to operate safely during active fires and restore supply in fire affected areas, where access, safety controls and approval processes all shape what can be done and when.

This submission is based on Powercor's experience before, during and after the January 2026 fire events. It addresses:

- The impact these fires had on the electricity network and how our teams safely accessed sites, in collaboration with emergency authorities, to restore power as quickly as possible.
- Observations from operating during major events where regulatory and approval arrangements can slow restoration for affected communities.

- Our investment plans to further strengthen the network and support faster recovery during extreme events such as fires.

To keep the submission brief, we've focused on the impact these fires had on our network and our operational response. It does not set out in detail the extensive customer communications and community support activities that also occurred. This communication and engagement included on-the-ground community support at designated relief centres, attendance at community information sessions, as well as the use of multiple channels to distribute information to customers before, during and after each event. Further information on these activities can be provided if required.

[REDACTED]

Kind regards,

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

Powercor

# 1. The impact of the 2026 summer's fires on power assets and how we responded

Powercor's network and customers were impacted by two separate major weather events during January 2026 (**7 to 9 January and 27 January**). On 7 January, multiple campaign fires began, damaging and destroying large sections of Powercor's electricity network and disrupting power supply to parts of regional Victoria. Some of these fires, including in the Otways, were propelled during the 27 January weather event.

Across the two events:

- Around 300 power poles were destroyed and replaced
- Significant additional power assets were damaged, including transformers, insulators and crossarms
- Hundreds of Powercor field and support staff were mobilised over extended periods to support damage assessment, repair and restoration works.

Powercor has in-house field crews based in 14 depots across our network footprint. This means we can quickly deploy large numbers of people from different parts of the state to undertake damage assessment, conduct repairs and restore supply to our customers once it's safe to do so.

For both events, we:

- Activated a pre-established emergency response structure ahead of each weather event to allow us to respond quickly.
- Significantly increased resourcing across field crews, control room operations, dispatch, our Bendigo-based customer contact centre and other specialist teams to support the event.
- Embedded staff within the State Control Centre and local Incident Control Centres to work directly with CFA, SES and other emergency authorities.
- Where possible, we used technology such as drones to conduct preliminary inspections of our network before crews could safely access sites, allowing us to pre-plan repair work and get power on quickly. This was done in collaboration with emergency authorities to coordinate a safe and rapid response.
- Worked closely with agencies and organisations to prioritise restoration to critical infrastructure such as mobile phone towers. However, this event again reinforced the need for critical services to be identified before the event and have back up supplies in case they are impacted by prolonged outages.

This close coordination supported real-time information sharing, prioritisation, access decisions and our inspection and restoration work alongside emergency response activities.

Below is a summary of each event and the operational factors that shaped restoration efforts.

## 7 to 9 January event

### *Conditions and fire activity*

From Wednesday 7 January, large parts of Victoria experienced extreme heat, with temperatures reaching up to 45 degrees in some areas of the Powercor network. A heatwave warning was in place from Wednesday through to Friday.

With these conditions forecast, we activated our emergency team and associated processes in advance to allow us to effectively coordinate our response efforts if the network was impacted.

On Friday 9 January:

- Multiple districts were declared under Catastrophic fire danger ratings
- Strong winds peaked at 105 kilometres per hour
- Thunderstorms brought dry lightning, triggering multiple fires.

Four major fire fronts affected the Powercor network:

- Natimuk, west of Horsham
- Skipton, west of Ballarat
- Harcourt, south of Bendigo
- Cobram, in northern Victoria

#### *Network impact and customer outages*

The combined heatwave and bushfire conditions on 9 January caused rapid and widespread power outages across the Powercor network.

- About 52,000 Powercor customers were off supply at the peak of the event. (Outage causes varied and included, but not limited to, lightning, vegetation and fire damage).
- Large sections of the network were damaged and needed to be rebuilt, with more than 270 power poles replaced.

We were able to progressively restore power where we could gain access to fire grounds and it was safe to do so.

- 90 per cent of customers were restored within 12 hours of the peak.

Prolonged outages were largely confined to active or recently controlled firegrounds.

- 1,184 Powercor customers were off supply for longer than 72 hours
- These longer outages were due to it being unsafe for our crews to access these sites to conduct the extensive rebuilding work required to get power supply back on.

In some locations, restoration took up to a week due to:

- Ongoing fireground access restrictions
- The need to assess and remove unstable or fire damaged vegetation
- The level of destruction required Powercor to rebuild destroyed assets as they were beyond repair.

Power was restored to all customers by 17 January, 2026.

#### *Access and approvals during restoration*

Among the infrastructure damaged during this event was a powerline supplying communications facilities at Mount Alexander. This facility was also extensively damaged by the fires.

In this case, Parks Victoria attended site and approved the rebuild on the day, allowing works to proceed as soon as safe access was confirmed. This example contrasts with other fire affected rebuilds where approval processes have taken months, as outlined later in this submission.

## 27 January event

### *Conditions and fire activity*

A second major event occurred on 27 January, with a statewide heatwave and multiple fires starting or continuing across Victoria.

- Temperatures exceeded 40 degrees across much of the state
- Parts of north west Victoria recorded up to 48.9 degrees (a Victorian record).
- Victoria experienced a new all-time peak electricity demand of 10,784 megawatts
- Powercor reached a peak demand of 2,462 megawatts (about 5 per cent higher than our previous record).

At the same time, several fires that had started in early January were still burning and impacted the Powercor network, with the worst affected areas including:

- Otways National Park
- Carlisle River
- Gellibrand

### *Network impact and customer outages*

During this event:

- 100,563 Powercor customers experienced a sustained outage. (Again, the range of causes varied and included protection devices activating, as well as fires.)
- 22 power poles were destroyed and were replaced
- 96% of customers were restored within 12 hours
- 112 Powercor customers experienced outages longer than 72 hours, due to access restrictions to fire-affected areas outside of our control.

Where outages were prolonged, this was due to our crews unable to safely access fire-affected areas. In some locations, restoration took up to five days while areas were made safe and access approvals were confirmed.

## 2. Regulatory and approval settings during emergency response

During major bushfire events, restoring electricity supply often involves more than technical repair work. It can require rebuilding destroyed assets, accessing fire affected land and, in some cases, adjusting the location or design of infrastructure to meet current safety standards.

Our experience during and after recent fire events has once again highlighted that approval and permitting processes can unintentionally delay restoration during declared emergencies.

When powerlines are destroyed by fire, they cannot always be rebuilt in the same way or in the same location due to a range of reasons including changes to site conditions, access constraints or updates to safety standards. For example, if a powerline is damaged in a designated Bushfire Construction Area, the design may need to be altered to meet new standards or requirements. In these

circumstances, Powercor may be required to seek environmental, cultural heritage or planning approvals before rebuilding can proceed, taking up to a year to complete in normal circumstances.

Under current arrangements, even where infrastructure has been destroyed by bushfire and customers are reliant on temporary supply, these approvals can take many months to complete.

Clarification of emergency exemptions is required to support communities.

### Where current arrangements can delay restoration

As mentioned above, during the 7 to 9 January bushfire, a major powerline supplying communications facilities at Mount Alexander during the Harcourt fire event was destroyed. During this event, we were able to receive approval to rebuild quickly.

This is an example of a pragmatic approach to restoring power assets during major events.

A contrasting example occurred following the December 2024 fires in the Grampians, which destroyed electricity infrastructure supplying the Mount William site.

The damage disrupted supply to critical telecommunications, broadcast and radio, including services supporting Airservices Australia.

Because backup diesel generation was in place and customers were on temporary supply, the works were not deemed emergency under current arrangements. As a result, full planning, environmental and cultural heritage approvals were required before rebuilding could proceed.

These approval processes extended over many months. Over more than six months, customers supplied from the Mount William P36 substation continued to rely on generator supply, consuming significant volumes of diesel and increasing cost and vulnerability.

### Practical implications for communities

We are required to meet regulated timeframes for restoring supply, maintaining its network and connecting critical infrastructure. At the same time, we must comply with multiple approval regimes overseen by state agencies and local government bodies.

Where these frameworks are not aligned during emergencies, the result can be delayed permanent restoration, extended reliance on temporary generation, and higher cost and ongoing risk for communities.

These challenges are not unique to Powercor and are experienced across Victorian electricity networks.

### Opportunity for improvement

Based on operational experience, there is an opportunity for the Committee to improve current legislation and approval frameworks to better support restoration during emergency conditions.

This includes reviewing whether exemptions are in place or approvals can be made more flexible, for a limited period, when essential power infrastructure is damaged, and whether it should be clearer when works qualify as an emergency if customers are relying on temporary power.

This is not about lowering safety or environmental and cultural heritage standards. It reflects what it is like to operate during major emergencies and the importance of helping communities recover as quickly and safely as possible.

### 3. Network resilience and preparedness

Powercor is committed to investing to strengthen its electricity network so it remains safe, reliable and resilient as extreme weather events become more frequent and intense.

This work has been underway for many years and focuses on practical improvements that reduce risk during bushfires and heatwaves, support safe operation during emergencies, and improve recovery outcomes for communities. This includes increased pole replacement, undergrounding powerlines in targeted high bushfire risk areas, and the inclusion of community support activities, including response vehicles.

We are often asked why we don't underground more of our network to protect it from weather events and fires. Undergrounding can be appropriate in specific, localised situations. However, across long distance regional networks with relatively low customer density, it is not a realistic or affordable solution for most communities.

Network investment is paid for by customers and is regulated and approved through a national framework. Powercor submits its proposed investment program to the Australian Energy Regulator as part of a five-year regulatory cycle.

Each proposal must be supported by detailed business cases and assessed against safety, reliability, efficiency and cost to customers.

In our 2026-31 regulatory proposal, which the Australian Energy Regulator is currently reviewing and is due to publish its decision in late April, we have proposed the following:

- Replacing about 960 high risk wooden poles with fire resistant concrete poles across three highest bushfire risk areas of our network over the 2026 to 2031 period. In addition, we are proposing to install a further 12,500 concrete poles as part of our general pole replacement program.
- Installing fire mesh on select wooden poles situated in grass land in high-risk bushfire areas.
- Improving our climate and outage modelling to better understand how heat, bushfires and storms affect different parts of the network.
- Installing two microgrids in communities most exposed to long duration outages. These include local generation and can keep towns and critical community sites supplied when the main network is unavailable.
- Installing 17 mobile generator connection points at vulnerable towns to enable rapid generator connection, which will reduce mobile generator deployment time, providing townships with resilience during long duration outage events.
- Upgrading backup power at 23 key radio communication sites, providing 48 or 72 hours of battery capacity to support communications during prolonged outages and emergencies.
- Additional mobile emergency response vehicles to support multiple outages at the same time.
- Improved situational awareness and prioritisation tools to support clearer decision making during major events.

In addition, we work with communities to support them build resilience and prepare for potential power outage through a range of ways, including at emergency community sessions and expos and our annual summer preparedness campaign.

**END**