



Cables Downunder

C/O Peter Downey
Chairman
PO Box 852
Pennant Hills
NSW 1715
Ph 9484 7461
Fax 9484 7446

E-Mail Cables.Downunder@bigpond.com

Alison Kelly,
Committee Secretary
Senate Select Committee on the National Broadband Network
SF61.1 Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600
broadband.sen@aph.gov.au
Alison.Kelly@aph.gov.au

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SUPPLEMENTARY SUBMISSION.

A submission to the Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission suggested about 70 per cent of deaths on Black Saturday were linked to failures in power infrastructure. Barrister Tim Tobin, QC, cited evidence given in closed court by Detective Superintendent Paul Hollowood that attributed a high percentage of deaths to failed electricity assets. Several of the February 7 bushfires - including the devastating Kilmore East fire - are thought to have been ignited by fallen power lines. Mr Tobin, representing individuals and businesses in a class action against electricity company SP AusNet, told the commission the majority of Victorian fires in 1969, 1977 and 1983 were also caused by the failure of electricity assets such as power lines and poles.

At the same time as the failure of the power, especially the burning down of power poles, the communications which often rely on such assets also failed, leaving individuals and whole communities without communication to the outside world. Not only were communications between those in peril disrupted, but the fire fighting assets as well as the whole command and control structure were isolated. As a result, the fire went unchecked in many areas due to the failure of the communications infrastructure. This was not an isolated case as the same has occurred in other fires and emergencies. The importance of such critical reliance on communications can not be overstated. Especially with changing weather patterns due to climate change / global warming, it must be assumed that these situations will only increase in the future unless our communications infrastructure is adequately protected in vulnerable areas.

A similar case occurred in the 1994 Canberra Bush Fires. While I no longer have a copy of the report, I distinctly recall an article on this subject - perhaps in the Magazine of the Institution of Engineers Australia. The article detailed the breakdown of communications and the cause. There was both graphic as well as written evidence of how underground cables were unaffected by the fire except when the insulation melted due to radiant heat from the steel lids of utility pits. This can best be described as a design oversight which could simply be rectified by the redesign of the lids and retrofitting them to existing pits as well as all new installations.

When it is considered that such installations and networks are not only critical in emergencies but are also of strategic importance in time of war (witness a training exercise during WW II when a squad led by W.C. Wentworth shut down every telephone exchange between Maroubra and Liverpool); to do otherwise would be negligent. I am informed that after WW II the then PMG Department began a program to bury all their services for strategic and security reasons as funds and labour became available. Indeed I remember the single strand copper wires in my street being buried and the poles removed in the 1950's.

With the building of the proposed National Broadband Network, using cutting edge materials and design, nothing should be left to chance. It must be expected that the NBN will become the pre-eminent network in the country and as such be covered by the Universal Service Obligation where it is necessary, for example, to supply emergency contact such as ringing "000".

As someone who has a history of cardiac complaints, I can attest to the importance of the ability to be able to ring "000" in an emergency. Around eighteen months ago I was suffering from severe chest pains and after seeking medical advice was advised to immediately hang up and ring "000" for an ambulance to take me to hospital for investigation and monitoring. I was then dismayed to find that due to a motor vehicle accident, both my fixed telephone lines were cut and my VoIP phone did not work as the same incident had also taken out the Telstra Cable modem service. Although I live in a suburb of Sydney I have poor mobile coverage in my area and so in this condition I had to walk out into the middle of the street to call out an ambulance.

Can you imagine how the people in Marysville and Kilmore East felt when they were cut off from contact with the outside world?

All I and Cables Downunder ask is that these situations be addressed in the same manner as they have in many other countries, by securely burying the strategically important NBN cable instead of draping it from power poles where it is open to all the vagaries of the environment.

Yours faithfully.

Peter Downey
Chairman
Sydney Cables Downunder.