

Senate Standing Committee on Environment and Communications

Answers to Senate Estimates Questions on Notice

Budget Estimates hearing May 2017

Communications Portfolio

Department of Communications and the Arts

Question No: 35

Program 1.1

Hansard Ref: Written, 02/06/2017

Topic: Mobile Battery Backup

Senator Griff, Stirling asked:

Many residents across South Australia lost power for up to five days over the recent Christmas-New Year period, and had no means of telecommunication or internet communication with the outside world once local mobile towers ran out of battery. Unless there is localised battery-backup or a generator, the NBN does not work during a power outage.

The Adelaide Hills is a high fire-risk area. Unable to communicate with the outside world by telephone or internet, the power outage situation would have been critically serious if there had been a bushfire.

1. What contingency plans does the Department have in place to ensure telecommunications remain active for as long as possible during a power outage or emergency?
2. Does the Department have emergency planning for regions, in relation to continuity of telecommunications services? Can you please outline these plans?
3. What contingency plans have the Department and NBN Co developed for the operation of the NBN during a power outage?
4. In its consideration of emergency situations, has the Department considered the effect that power outages now have upon Medicalert devices when the NBN goes down?
5. Is the Department considering making it a contractual requirement that mobile phone towers in high-risk bushfire areas have increased hours of battery-backup operation, or alternatively, generators? If not, why not?

Answer:

1. Communications providers invest in back-up power sources and have crisis management plans in place to manage service outages and restore infrastructure as quickly as possible, subject to factors such as personnel safety, during a power outage or emergency.
2. No. Under Australia's constitutional arrangements, state and territory governments have primary responsibility for emergency management within their jurisdictions.
3. NBN Co Ltd (nbn) has established Business Continuity, Crisis Management and Disaster Recovery Plans to safeguard against events such as natural hazards and other business interruptions, including network outages, and recovery of operations and services in these events.
4. Medical alarms need to be migrated to the NBN or an alternative operating platform before the existing fixed line services over which they operate are disconnected. nbn launched a medical alarm register in 2014 to help identify customers with medical alarms (both monitored and unmonitored) and to support those customers during migration to the NBN

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(the register currently has over 185,000 entries). nbn has also engaged a managed service provider to work directly with medical alarm service providers to assist in the migration process. The Department continues to engage with nbn to identify what further initiatives may be required with regards to medical alarms and the NBN.

5. No. The Department supports a number of initiatives under the Critical Infrastructure Resilience Strategy administered by the Attorney-General's Department. Specifically, the Department supports the Communications Sector Group, part of the Trusted Information Sharing Network for Critical Infrastructure Resilience, which brings governments and critical infrastructure owners and operators together to discuss planning and solutions for the continuity and restoration of critical infrastructure and essential services, in response to all hazards including natural disasters.