



RFS



Australian Energy Regulator
AERresets2024-29@aer.gov.au

22 January 2024

To whom it may concern

RFS support for Ausgrid Climate Resilience Program

RFS would like to express its support for the business case by Ausgrid for climate resilience submitted as part of *Ausgrid - Revised proposal to Australian Energy Regulator - 2024-29 Revised Regulatory Proposal - 30 Nov 2023*.

RFS is the lead agency for the coordination of bush firefighting and prevention throughout the state. The Service works closely with other agencies to respond to a range of emergencies including structure fires, motor vehicle accidents and storms that occur within the rural fire districts that make up more than 95 per cent of NSW.

A significant focus for RFS has been to work with other stakeholders in NSW to respond to the NSW Bushfire Inquiry in response to the 2019/20 bush fire season. The 2019/20 bush fire season was the toughest and most devastating season ever experienced in NSW, setting new records for area burnt, homes destroyed and lives lost.

Over the course of the fire season, 5.5 million hectares of bush and grass were burnt in NSW – nearly seven percent of the state. In addition to this, 2,476 homes and more than 5,000 other buildings were destroyed. Thanks to the hard work of NSW RFS members and other firefighting agencies, 14,567 homes and more than 15,000 other buildings were saved.

On 30 January 2020 the Premier announced an Inquiry into the 2019-20 bush fire season to make recommendations in relation to bush fire preparedness and response and to report by 31 July 2020, ahead of the 2020-21 bush fire season.

The Inquiry worked to understand what happened during the 2019-20 bush fire season and how it was different to seasons that have come before, and to make recommendations for future improvements to how NSW plans and prepares for, and responds to, bush fires. The NSW Bushfire Inquiry raised the following key points regarding critical infrastructure:

- Electricity networks were extensively affected by the fires, resulting in tens of thousands of people without power.
- The biggest consequence of power outages was the loss of communications, as communications towers lost power supply and appropriate backup systems were not in place. Lack of communications affected the community's ability to receive critical warnings and meant community members couldn't contact family and friends, which added to their distress.
- Limited access to real-time information from energy and telecommunications providers made it difficult for the NSW RFS to know where critical sites were located and limited the NSW Telco Authority's ability to understand the status of network damage and outages.

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Ausgrid have met with RFS on several occasions to discuss their climate resilience proposal and opportunities for our organisation to work together in preparedness and response arrangements. The key points discussed by Ausgrid and supported by RFS are:

- Bushfire resistant poles – Ausgrid’s proposal to upgrade electricity poles to bush fire resilient poles during normal replacement cycles is strongly supported. The objective to build back better is consistent with the recovery planning objectives throughout all level of government in response to all natural disasters.
- Increase emergency response capability by investing in additional fault detectors and location sensors to save time detecting faults in emergency situations. This will decrease the time the community is without power during events and improve safety for crews only accessing active fire grounds were known faults are occurring.
- Data sharing- The NSW Bushfire Inquiry specifically identified data sharing as a limitation to cross agency operation. RFS has significantly improved its capacity to consume and interpret data since 2019-20 fire season and support better multi-agency coordination and data sharing (eg Athena fire intelligence <https://www.smh.com.au/national/nsw/there-s-nothing-like-this-firefighters-unleash-new-bushfire-war-machine-20230921-p5e6g6.html>)
- Community Resilience to better prepare the most vulnerable communities for blackouts is another valuable initiative. RFS is keen to work collaboratively to assist with providing the community appropriate messaging about accessing warnings and alerts.
- Additional Network Resilience to prevent outages in high winds.

If you would like further information about the RFS submission, please contact Melissa O’Halloran at

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