

Your Reference: 5649  
Our Reference: MIN45129.03

Mr N Laurie  
Clerk of the Parliament  
Parliament House  
George Street  
BRISBANE QLD 4000

Dear Mr Laurie

**Re: Petition Received by the Legislative Assembly**

Thank you for your letter of 21 August 2003 forwarding a copy of the petition lodged by Mr Warren Pitt MP, Member for Mulgrave regarding the performance of the electricity distribution network in the Innisfail area.

I am very concerned about the frequency and number of power supply interruptions in the Innisfail area. The Queensland Government recognises the importance of a reliable electricity supply for consumers.

The Innisfail Central Business District (CBD) is normally serviced by three 22,000 volt distribution lines (Innisfail Number 1, Number 2 and Number 3 feeders). I am advised approximately 5,000 of the area's 9,500 customers are normally supplied via the three Innisfail feeders with the larger commercial CBD customers supplied by the Innisfail Number 3 feeder (approximately 259 customers). This underground feeder is sourced from the East Palmerston substation and is approximately 7 km from the CBD.

During the past 12 to 18 months there have been an increasing number of failures on the Innisfail Number 3 feeder. After several failures in a short space of time early this year, Ergon Energy (Ergon) took this feeder out of service. Load from the CBD and surrounding suburbs was shared between the remaining two feeders. This resulted in customers normally supplied by the Number 1 and 2 feeders being transferred to the Mourilyan and Babinda Number 1 feeders. The time taken to restore supply after an interruption has been affected on these feeders due to the Innisfail Number 3 feeder being out of service.

Ergon has advised the Innisfail Number 3 feeder was installed about 20 years ago as a high reliability fully underground supply to the Innisfail CBD. Underground cables are normally

very reliable and have an average life span of about 40 years. I am advised the cable failures on this feeder have been unpredictable, and Ergon's past practice has been to identify the fault site and undertake a localised repair.

To identify the cause of the continuing cable failures, Ergon brought in specialised testing equipment from Switzerland. This investigation determined that the failures were caused by the cable manufacturing processes combined with high local rainfall levels and installation methods at the time. Tests also indicated a 1.5 km section of cable needed to be replaced. Whilst the balance of the length of the original cable displayed some degradation, it was considered to be serviceable into the foreseeable future.

I am advised in June 2003 Ergon replaced the faulty section of cable at a cost of \$300,000 and commenced to recommission the cable. Unfortunately after 36 hours of the line being energised without load it failed and Ergon immediately took the cable out of service.

Ergon has now decided to replace the remaining 4.5 km of underground cable. The work is expected to be completed by the end of 2003 subject to cable deliveries. This will reinstate the Innisfail Number 3 feeder as a high reliability feeder and will significantly improve the reliability of the electricity network in the area.

Ergon will also be targeting supply reliability in the Innisfail area with just over \$2 M to be spent on capital improvement works during the 2003-04 financial year. The budget has been allocated as follows:

- (1) \$650,000 for the replacement of the Innisfail Number 3 feeder;
- (2) \$143,000 for augmentation of the Innisfail Number 1 feeder;
- (3) \$300,000 for a 1 km underground cable to the Warrina Nursing Home;
- (4) \$820,000 for repairs;
- (5) \$240,000 for specified reliability improvement projects; and
- (6) \$ 41,000 for upgrades at the Babinda Switching Station.

These works will be undertaken over the next 12 months, however, the reinstatement of the Innisfail Number 3 feeder is the highest priority.

In addition to the capital works program, Ergon has in place a thorough asset inspection and maintenance program. This program will see every pole, cross-arm and conductor span inspected at least once every three years whereas the industry standard is a five year inspection cycle. In 2002-03 approximately 2,600 poles were inspected and a further 6,900 poles are scheduled for inspection in Innisfail in 2003-04. I note asset inspectors are currently working in the area. Any urgent repairs identified by these inspectors will be carried out immediately by Ergon staff and contractors who are currently working in the Innisfail area replacing cross-arms on poles identified from previous inspections. Any non urgent defects will be scheduled for repair and will be carried out within the six month repair time frame.

Ergon also has a \$1.024 M vegetation program in the Innisfail/Tully area in 2003-04 as part of its \$5.431 M program for the Far North region. I am advised feedback from the community in relation to the vegetation management program in the area has been positive and vegetation related interruptions have significantly reduced in recent years. Over the past six years Ergon and its predecessor Far North Queensland Electricity Board have recorded a 70% reduction in vegetation related interruptions.

It is expected residents and business operators in the Innisfail area will see a significant improvement in the reliability and performance of the electricity network as a result of these works. Ergon has also advised it will provide regular status reports via media releases and meetings with key community leaders, such as Mr Warren Pitt MP, Member for Mulgrave, to ensure residents are informed of the progress of these works.

Unfortunately, no matter what preventative measures are implemented, neither Ergon nor any other electricity distributor can guarantee an electricity supply 100% of the time, as there will always be events such as vehicle accidents, wildlife, vegetation and natural events such as storms, which have the potential to impact on power supply reliability and quality and are beyond the control of Ergon.

However, following completion of the works identified above, I expect to see an improvement to the reliability of supply in Innisfail.

Thank you for bringing this matter to my attention. It would be appreciated if you could table my response on the Parliamentary website. An electronic version will be emailed to your office for this purpose. If you have any further queries, please contact Mr Lucien Whitten from my office on telephone number (07) 3235 4286.

Yours sincerely

**PAUL LUCAS MP**  
**Minister for Innovation**  
**and Information Economy**  
**Minister with responsibility for Energy**