



Speech by

Hon. T. McGRADY

MEMBER FOR MOUNT ISA

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MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

Energex Corporation, Public Safety

Hon. T. McGRADY (Mount Isa—ALP) (Minister for Mines and Energy and Minister Assisting the Deputy Premier on Regional Development) (10 a.m.), by leave: Late last year I commissioned an investigation into a number of issues regarding public safety and asset management within the Energex Corporation. The investigation was carried out by Mr Ron McGuigan and Mr Dick Williams, who are both very well regarded for their knowledge of and experience in the electricity industry.

The report has been submitted to me and contains a number of significant recommendations to improve electrical safety in Queensland. Although originally commissioned in regard to Energex, the issues identified are in fact largely applicable right across the State. I can assure the House that the Government will be giving very sympathetic consideration to the recommendations.

The key recommendations include: the mandatory installation of safety switches in all consumer installations; the development of legislation, supported by a code of practice, to allocate responsibility for vegetation management to appropriate stakeholders including the State Government, local councils and home owners; improved public awareness and understanding of the hazards associated with electricity; reviewing safety legislation and developing a code of practice for safety within the industry; and the progressive undergrounding of existing overhead wires.

The recommendation on safety switches concerns the mandatory retrofitting of these devices into all customers' installations within a time frame of, say, two years. Since 1991, it has been mandatory for all new houses to have safety switches installed. However, about half of the houses built before 1991 do not have safety switches installed. In the past the Government has promoted the installation of these devices through various means, including a subsidy program and a number of public awareness campaigns.

Both Ergon and Energex currently have programs in place which allow customers to have a safety switch fitted and pay for it over an extended time period through their electricity accounts. There is no doubt that safety switches save lives. I have been advised that there have been nine fatal electrical accidents in domestic situations since the beginning of last year. All of these could have been prevented if a correctly functioning safety switch had been providing protection.

Given the technical, financial and legislative facets of this program, I have established a working group comprising State and local government officials and electricity industry representatives. The working group will assess all issues associated with a mandatory program, including the legislative or regulatory requirements to underpin the program, how the program could be implemented and how costs could be fairly levied.

In the matter of vegetation management, it is quite clear that vegetation overgrowth is a major cause of overhead power line breakage, particularly during storms. Currently, the distribution corporations are responsible for the clearing of all vegetation that could affect the safe operation of overhead powerlines.

The investigation has noted that there is no onus on the owners of trees, including local councils, Main Roads and home owners, to take responsibility for planting unsuitable trees near powerlines. For example, a home owner or local council could plant unsuitable trees under powerlines, but the distribution corporation has to manage and trim the trees. Other States throughout the

Commonwealth have more detailed legislation that distributes the responsibility more equitably between the various stakeholders. The report notes that the responsibility for the trimming of trees near overhead lines rests entirely with the electricity distribution corporations and recommends that legislation, supported by a code of practice, be developed to allocate responsibility for vegetation management to the appropriate stakeholders.

The Local Government Association of Queensland and the Queensland electricity distributors are close to finalising a code of practice on vegetation and the electricity supply network. I fully support the recommendation that legislation be reviewed to more adequately allocate responsibility for vegetation management near powerlines. The implementation of this recommendation will be progressed by the Department of Mines and Energy in consultation with the Electrical Health and Safety Council, other relevant State Government agencies and local government.

There is also a recommendation to improve public awareness and understanding of the hazards associated with electricity. This recommendation promotes the development of a coordinated and extensive public education program to improve public awareness and understanding of the hazards associated with electricity and the appropriate responses to emergency situations. This recommendation is already being addressed through the existing Queensland Electricity Education Council, which is currently conducting a review of existing awareness strategies. It is expected that, upon completion of this review, the council will be recommending that an expanded public awareness program be implemented. In regard to the recommendation for a review of electricity safety legislation, I am pleased to say that this is also currently under way.

The final major recommendation concerns the undergrounding of existing overhead domestic powerlines throughout the State to eliminate the danger posed by these lines if they are brought down. As members are probably aware, I fully support the undergrounding of existing overhead powerlines in city and urban areas. Western Australia has a project under way to place its distribution powerlines underground in urban areas. I have examined this program at first hand in order to discuss project viabilities and possible funding arrangements with local governments and electricity companies. I believe that this is something we have to address.

The recommendations contained in this report will be considered by the Government and I hope and expect all members of this House to play an important part in this process.
