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Heatwave triggers rare emergency response from power grid operator

Adam Carey

A heatwave prompted the electricity grid operator to activate its emergency plan to avoid black-outs yesterday.

It is the first time in years that the Australian Energy Market Operator has taken this step in Victoria as a way to avoid the risk of involuntary load shedding caused by overwhelming demand. A lack of reserve capacity in the state's electricity grid prompted the rare move.

The action comes after months of warnings that Victoria's reserves would be stretched tight this summer, after the closure of the Hazelwood coal-fired power plant in March.

Victoria had two days of temperatures in the mid-to-high 30s on Wednesday and yesterday.

The emergency reserve, called the "Reliability and Emergency Reserve Trader", was put in place for six hours, between 3.30pm and 9.30pm. The mechanism is triggered only when the electricity market is unable to meet demand.

It gives AEMO authority to take emergency measures such as switching on diesel generators, or paying power-hungry businesses to temporarily cut consumption.

An AEMO spokeswoman declined to say precisely what steps it had taken yesterday, citing commercial confidentiality.

The shortfall in electricity reserves in the grid was less than 100 megawatts, the spokeswoman said.

The triggering of the emergency reserve comes just two days after AEMO released its summer readiness report for 2017-18 and announced that it had sourced an extra 2000MW. The 2000MW would more than make up for Hazelwood's closure in March, AEMO said.

"Our forecasts for this summer identified risks of supply falling short of demand in some extreme but foreseeable conditions, and also of the system not having enough reserve power to respond to unforeseen emergencies," the report said.

"Although the risk of uncontrollable weather and system events which result in loss of power are always present ... AEMO has worked hard with market participants and Commonwealth and state governments to secure sufficient resources and be summer-ready."

PHOTO: AEMO