

Woodside gets 'please explain'

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The political and economic repercussions of the power crisis this week began to be felt yesterday when the State Government warned Woodside it would launch an investigation into the gas shortage if the company did not provide a full explanation of what happened.

Energy Minister Fran Logan ordered Woodside to explain why a supposedly small fire at its Karratha gas plant caused gas supplies to be shut off for more than 48 hours as businesses across the State began counting the cost of Wednesday and Thursday's power debacle, during which industry and households were asked to conserve electricity to head off the chance of rolling blackouts.

The gas shortage forced Verve Energy Power to shut some of its gasfired generators and ask consumers to restrict electricity use, including limiting air-conditioning, on Wednesday when the temperature hit 42C.

Woodside failed to meet a deadline to resume domestic gas production by Thursday night, with gas finally flowing into the Dampier to Bunbury pipeline at 1.30pm yesterday.

The delay in resuming gas production forced the Government to ask Burrup Fertilisers to extend its pledge to supply 15 terajoules of gas for another 24 hours so that electricity generators in the South-West were guaranteed a steady supply of gas until 1pm today.

"I've expressed my concerns to Woodside and I've indicated to Woodside that I'll be asking very clear questions about what happened and I'll be expecting clear answers," Mr Logan said.

An investigation would be ordered if he was not satisfied with the response.

Verve Energy spokesman Peter Winner said the company expected to have all plants back to full production by today, which would allow the power generating company to meet a predicted spike in power consumption when temperatures increase on Monday.

"The position that has been adopted by the company is that it was an event that was beyond the control of Woodside and we've done

what we've needed to do to keep as much of our plant operating as possible and we will wear that cost," he said.

Woodside spokeswoman Kirsten Stoney apologised to customers across WA yesterday. Technical complications had meant that production had taken longer to resume than expected.

"We regret the inconvenience caused to our customers as a result of the production outage and we've been doing everything possible to resume gas production from our facilities," she said. "We'll certainly carry out a full investigation into the incident and implement any learnings as a result."

A spokesman for mining giant Rio Tinto said it had had to reduce production at its processing facilities. He said the company would look at the full ramifications of the past two days, including whether action would be taken against Woodside.

Opposition Leader Paul Omodei said that, as a major supplier to the public, Woodside should be answering questions on the issue.

"I'd hope that the Government would have negotiated any contracts in a way which would afford the community the opportunity for cost recovery for unreasonable failures," he said.

BEATRICE THOMAS