

Electricity bans loom

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Bracks considers outlawing air conditioners after bushfire cuts power supply, bringing city to a halt

VICTORIANS could face bans on using home air-conditioners from today after a massive power supply failure yesterday left large areas of the state blacked out.

Senior state ministers met last night to consider mandatory power restrictions, as repair crews battled to get access to a key transmission line after it was knocked out by a bushfire at Tatong, near Benalla, in the state's north-east.

The same bushfire had also destroyed at least seven homes by late last night, authorities confirmed, and was still burning out of control, frustrating efforts to repair the power link.

Although electricity supplies had been restored to most areas of Victoria by 9pm yesterday, power companies warned that another day of searing heat today meant they could not guarantee supplies — unless the transmission line was repaired.

A spokesman for acting Premier John Thwaites said a final decision on power restrictions would be made when the immediate supply situation became clearer today.

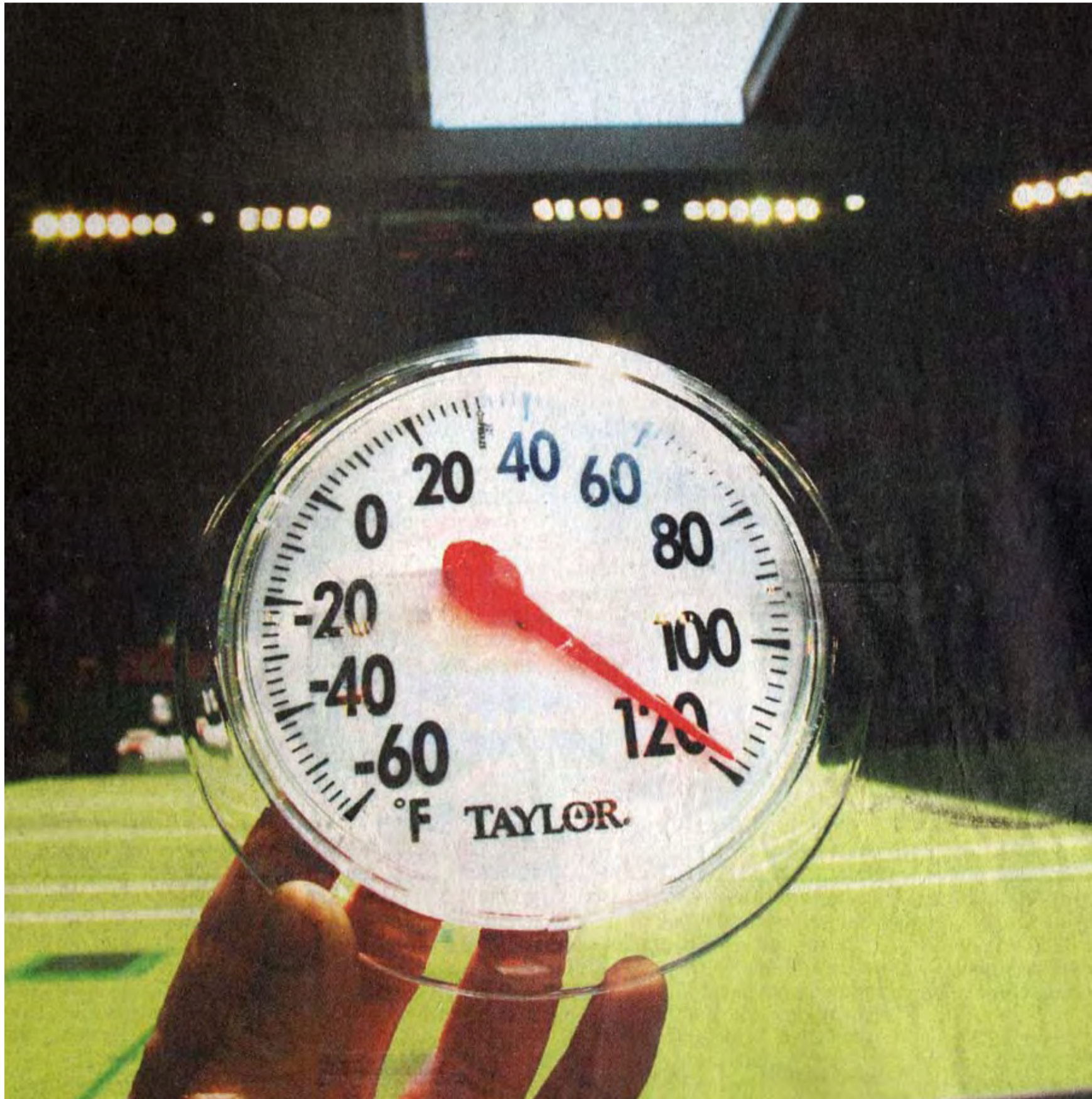
If the bans go ahead, they would be expected to cover the use of both refrigerative and evaporative home air-conditioning units, but not electric fans or office cooling systems. Exemptions would apply to sick, elderly and pregnant people.

It would be the first time Victorians have faced major power supply disruption since the crisis of early 2000, when industrial action, generator failure and high temperatures combined to trigger blackouts and restrictions.

Up to one-third of the state's power supply was cut around 4pm yesterday when smoke and ash from the fire at Tatong forced the automatic shutdown of the transmission line connecting Victoria to crucial peak power supplies from NSW.

Large areas of Melbourne, Geelong, Bendigo and Ballarat were without power for several hours, causing chaos on roads as traffic lights went out, disrupting public transport and trapping people inside stalled lifts.

The disruption to supply came at the worst possible time — on a day of record electricity demand in Victoria, with many people staying indoors and running air-conditioners as temperatures soared above 40 degrees across the state.



Through the roof: the thermometer measuring the on-court temperature at the Australian Open yesterday was stretched to breaking point at 118 degrees Fahrenheit, or 48 degrees Celsius. PICTURE: JASON SOUTH

Premier Steve Bracks cut short his summer holiday at Wye River, on the state's west coast, and rushed back to Melbourne to discuss the crisis with senior ministers.

Mr Thwaites said the Government would seek advice from the electricity companies "on the appropriate level of restrictions should they be introduced" and that, in the meantime, Victorians should try to restrict their use of air-conditioners and other energy-sapping appliances.

A spokesman for the National Electricity Market Management Company, or NEMMCO said that if the fire had not knocked out the Tatong transmission line, there would not have been any blackouts.

At the height of the chaos in the sweltering late afternoon

heat, the Metropolitan Fire Brigade took 42 calls for help and had to rescue dozens of people trapped inside elevators, including a pregnant woman and about 10 others from a lift in a Queens Road office block.

Transport across Melbourne was thrown into disarray, with thousands of train passengers briefly stuck inside carriages. One Connex driver told *The Age* it was "pure chaos" and on the verge of total collapse.

NEMMCO director Les Hosking said yesterday's record power consumption by Victorians because of the heat worsened the situation. "(An automatic trip-off) happens in bushfires when smoke gets so thick . . . that it actually earths the energy out of the line into the ground, and that causes the automatic trip-off."

Last night power and fire crews tried to inspect the transmission line, but were driven back by the flames from the cleared easement.

A spokeswoman for SP Ausnet, which manages the transmission line, said last night that it was hard to predict how soon the crews would be allowed in to repair any damage.

"The fire is quite out of control, it's intensified tonight," said SP Ausnet spokeswoman Emma

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