

Basslink powers up

By JOHN CAPLES

TASMANIA has relied on Basslink for 15 per cent of its electricity since the undersea cable was commissioned last May, Hydro Tasmania said yesterday.

And that proportion could rise if the State's big dry continues and major hydro storages drop towards some of their lowest levels on record.

Total storage is now less than 29 per cent of capacity, compared with 44 per cent at the same time last year.

Great Lake, which provides water for the 300MW Poatina and 80MW Trevallyn power stations, is down to just 16.5 per cent of capacity.

After the smallest yearly inflow into the lake ever recorded, Great Lake has only half the water it held this time last year.

It is the third-lowest level recorded. In June 2005 it fell to 14.49 per cent of capacity and in 1968 to just 8.05 per cent.

Hydro Tasmania has closed three more boat ramps on the lake for safety reasons, with now only Boundary Bay and Swan Bay ramps still operational.

Tasmania's largest storage, Lake Gordon, has dropped to 32 per cent of capacity and continues to fall.

Lake Gordon power station, with a

generating capacity of 432MW, is the State's largest.

Since May, the wind farm at Woolnorth in the State's far North-West has produced just 2 per cent of the State's energy.

The three 40MW portable gas-fired generators bought by the Hydro from the US last year are now operational at Bell Bay.

Combined with the intermittent use of the gas-fired Bell Bay power station, built in the late 1960s after one of the State's worst droughts, they provided 5 per cent of the power.

Hydro power stations made up the remaining 77 per cent.

However, a further 4 per cent of the Hydro's total generation, about 300 gigawatt hours, was exported to Victoria via Basslink.

That equates to 25 per cent of the 1200GWh of electricity imported from the mainland grid.

Hydro Tasmania says the financial details of that power trading must remain a commercial secret.

However, the value of exports is likely to have largely offset the imports, despite the big difference in volumes.

The theory behind Basslink from its inception was that Tasmania could sell short bursts of electricity into the mainland grid at high prices to meet morning and evening peak demands.

It could then buy back power from the mainland thermal power generators at low prices when demand fell during the night.

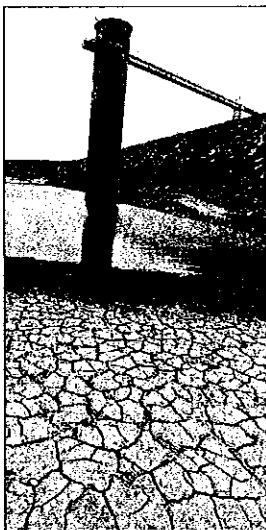
The big coal-fired stations are only efficient at full power — it is cheaper for their operators to sell excess power at low rates than to slow them down and fire them back up again.

Unless rainfall is much greater than expected over the next few months, water storages could easily drop to record lows.

There is now 4170GWh of power in water storages. It has been lower in previous years but not until the end of summer or early autumn.

Storages generally do not begin to rise until late autumn rains in May.

With still more than four months to go until May, Basslink and the State's gas-fired power generators are likely to be in ever-increasing demand.



The water level at Altona Dam at the southern end of the Great Lake yesterday. Photos: PHOTIC

