

Seamus O'Loughlin Opening Statement

Dear members of the Joint Committee on Communications, Climate Action and Environment.

First of all, thank you for inviting me today, on foot of the RTE Investigates programme, "ESB Leaks" which aired on 5th June 2019. The years preceding the broadcast and indeed, the weeks since have been an incredibly difficult journey for my family and I. I have been unable to work since 30th May 2018.

I would like to take this opportunity to outline my experience of the background behind some of ESB's non-compliance issues.

1. Propane Gas

ESB Networks staff use propane gas primarily to heat plastic type insulation. In April 2015 ESNB staff ignited a high-pressure gas main in Knocklyon, Co. Dublin. The subsequent investigation found serious shortfalls across three broad categories:

- Training
- Documented safe system of Work
- Safe tools & Equipment

The risk was so large that the ESNB health & safety programme board committed to resolving all the issues by June 2016. This commitment preceded my appointment into the role of Technical Development Manager however once I came into the role I started receiving ongoing complaints from staff as regards hot works issues. What really brought the issue to a head was that most of the actions from the investigation were not started by December 2017 when a near carbon copy incident occurred in the UCD campus in Belfield, thankfully no one was seriously injured this time. I raised the propane gas issue as one of 20 risks in February 2017 in what I understood to be a protected disclosure however in the 12

months post February 2017 I received 6 different instructions from senior management as to how to progress the propane gas issue and despite my best endeavours I received no commitment on resources, senior management buy in or finance in this time. This led to understandable frustration on my behalf. I understand a full roll out has been happening since I submitted protected disclosure #4 to the minister in January 2019.

2. Fluid Filled Cables

ESB Networks have approximately 120kms of high voltage cables which use a mixture of fluids as an insulating medium. As per the agreed PR3 submission to the regulator they contain 300,000 litres of oil. The annual leakage rate over the past 20 years averaged 50,000 litres per annum, this is a leakage rate of 17%, the worst years it ran at 30%. UK utilities using similar cables have a leakage rate of ~2% annually. ESB is an associate member of the UK based Energy Networks Association (ENA) which provides expert guidance on dealing with fluid filled cable leaks. The average leakage rate of 50,000 litres compare poorly against the ESN policy target of 15,000 litres per annum. In 2017 five cable circuits were shown to have an environmental risk rating of 9 and were all non-compliant with both the ESB and UK standards. The PR4 submission to the regulator by ESN referenced environmental risk 23 times. Although the replacement fluid is biodegradable, 90% of the fluid employed by ESB contains some element of mineral oil and indeed the internal ESB guidance is quite clear, *“ESB Networks is obliged by law to design out and manage the environmental risk posed by leakage from fluid filled cables on it’s network”*. It is my understanding that leakage detection & minimisation performance has improved since I submitted protected disclosure # 1 in January 2019.

3. Sulphur Hexafluoride (SF6) Reporting

In February 2017 I also raised an issue around maintenance, repair & calibration of SF6 handling equipment. Due to resource constraints since 2013 these high cost units were not subjected to any oversight as regards a maintenance regime. This was causing significant

issues for front line staff as regards complying with the F-Gas directive. The more I looked into the overall SF6 issue the more concerned I became. Once again I raised any issues I came across to management along with proposed solutions however SF6 did not seem to be a priority. I escalated the Moneypoint leakage issue in August 2017 and I understand the reporting to the EPA was amended following this however after this I was instructed not to raise any other environmental issues within ESNB by a senior manager. Moneypoint 400kV substation leaked more SF6 gas in 2017 than the entire of the UK transmission network. As per the f Gas directive records are to be kept for 5 years however there has never been a national coherent approach to SF6 reporting and our regime will not stand up to external scrutiny across any of the 18 high voltage substation supervisor areas, this is an institutional fault not any individuals. However there is draconian personal liability which front line staff may be exposed to if they knowingly keep topping up a leaking device. It is my understanding that significant improvements to the SF6 gas handling and reporting regime have happened since I submitted my protected disclosure #7 to the minister in January 2019.

4. Flexible earths

In June 2016 I was asked to go to the UK to carry out an in-depth study of ESNB earthing practices on foot of allegations being made by a supplier to ESNB of earthing materials. Rather than debunk these allegations the study validated many of them and also showed other areas where ESNB were not aligned with minimum industry standard in the UK. I expected that this report would be acted on within a reasonable timeframe however it was not until the disaffected supplier contacted the health & safety authority that ESNB started allocating proper resources to resolve the issues. It is my understanding that further improvements have happened since I submitted protected disclosure #4 to the minister in January 2019.

Summary

It is with a profound sense of regret that I find myself in front of you today washing the dirty linen of a company that I have worked for all my adult life and that I owe an awful lot to. I have tried to and continue to try to operate in the best long term interests of ESB and this has taken a very heavy toll on my personal and professional life. The ease at which ESB can chose which parts of it's own procedures & policies and indeed national and European legislation to comply with and which it can ignore is not a work practice which is sustainable in the current climate or which aligns with the purported values of the company. I take some succor that ESB is now a more compliant and safer utility for it's workers and also the general public on foot of my actions.

I do not regret appearing on the RTE Investigates programme, "ESB Leaks" however I am perplexed as to how it ever got this far.

I would also like to offer my time to all state agencies and any subsequent investigations which require clarification on any of the issues which I have raised. I would also like to place it on the record that malicious intent was never my intention I was simply trying to live by the ESB motto, "*Never turn a bling eye*" and I was also trying to do the right thing for my colleagues safety at what has turned out to be substantial personal cost.

Thank you for your time and I welcome any questions you may have.

Yours sincerely,

Seamus O'Loughlin