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WAPA Expecting Power Outages to Continue in St. Thomas-St. John Until Damaged, Aging Systems Are Replaced

WAPA's dependence on federal grants places utility at the mercy of FEMA and other federal agencies, while damage to Wartsila units has delayed installation

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“The system is damaged and it will continue to fail until these systems are replaced,” was the assessment from WAPA, which reported on a series of [power outages](#) affecting the St. Thomas/St. John district to the Public Services Commission’s board.

The power outages have become regular since [September 2023](#), with at least one outage lasting approximately 12 hours. Excavation work in September resulted in damage that forced WAPA to

employ week-long outage rotations for customers as technicians made repairs. In [October](#), inclement weather was blamed for another outage, while underground repairs triggered additional outages in late October. In November, the Donald Francois substation experienced a failure caused by “extended stress,” due to the infrastructure at that site compensating for previously damaged feeders and lines, explained Ashley Byran, WAPA’s chief operating officer of electric.

Damage caused by the 2017 hurricanes, said Ms. Byran, compromised WAPA’s full suite of electric distribution infrastructure - encompassing three major transmission lines - and has caused the Donald Francois substation to “fail a number of times over the course of the last six years.” As explained by Ms. Bryan, WAPA’s system was designed in a way that could ensure the other two systems could support the load of the third. However, with only two lines currently active, “we could no longer support the entire demand of the system. This was what caused the rotation for the customers in the St. Thomas/St. John district.”

WAPA says it's working to make the necessary replacements. The Federal Emergency Management Agency is expected to fund several mitigation projects that will involve specific repairs. She told commissioners that WAPA’s “only avenue is to rely on the federal grants that are available to us. “We came up with two sets of projects that would help to alleviate the issues that we've been having with the transmission system,” explained Ms. Byran. The first will involve “emergency construction of the overhead composite pole transmission system ... and the second is a replacement of the damaged underground sections.” These projects will reduce outages and offer a “better quality of life.”

“Tourists don't want to come to a territory where we're in subsequent power outages,” Ms. Bryan noted.

WAPA expects significant foundational work to take place “within the next couple of months.” As the Water and Power Authority works toward providing a consistent service to ratepayers, Ms. Bryan highlighted the importance of mobilizing the [Wärtsilä system](#). Though being used at a smaller scale, once the new generators are fully commissioned, WAPA is “hopeful that a blackout situation won't happen in this way again, especially not a prolonged blackout situation.” Damage to vital parts during shipping has been blamed for delays in getting the new, state-of-the-art generators fully online.

“It’s our intention to prevent these outages from happening again, as best as possible and put things in place so that we can prevent the impact that was seen over the last couple of months,” vowed Ms. Bryan. WAPA also intends to develop new standard operating procedures for underground troubleshooting and design a training program for relevant staff “that will bolster their skills on how to troubleshoot” various faults.