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Rolling Blackouts on St. Thomas and St. John to End by Friday, Says Karl Knight

Newly onboarded WAPA Executive Director Carl Knight explains the causes of power rotations and assures residents that the propane system will be restored by Friday, ending the rolling blackouts on St. Thomas and St. John

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The Randolph Harley Power Plant in St. Thomas, USVI. By. V.I. CONSORTIUM

Residents in the territory, increasingly frustrated with ongoing instability in their power supply, have had to contend with unplanned outages and a fresh round of rolling blackouts for St. Thomas and St. John, which began at the beginning of the week. The rotation of power is expected to stop by Friday, according to the V.I. Water and Power Authority's new executive director, Karl Knight.

On Wednesday, Mr. Knight spoke on the popular WTJX show "Analyze This" and addressed the reasons behind the power rotations on St. Thomas and St. John. "There is an issue that we're having with the propane system," Mr. Knight told Jamila Russell, who was standing in for regular "Analyze This" host Neville James.

Short on propane, WAPA has "had to fall back on some of the legacy units that we've had in St. Thomas - Unit 23, Unit 27, Unit 15," he disclosed. Units 15 and 23 are inefficient machines, he said, with WAPA employees dubbing them "the gas guzzlers." Units 23 and 27 are also overdue for major maintenance, and thus "continue to have issues anytime we have to run them for a sustained period of time," Mr. Knight continued.

"That's why that propane terminal is critical," Mr. Knight explained. "When we can't run on propane, we fall back on the older legacy units that WAPA had before the Wartsila project, and we end up in a situation where we have a lot of unreliability right now." With one of the units currently offline, "We're trying to carry St. Thomas and St. John with just two generators; that's just not enough capacity to carry the island fully." With not enough supply to meet the islands' power demands, "we do have to rotate power until we can get the propane system functioning," Mr. Knight admitted.

The immediate problem should be solved shortly, Mr. Knight said. "Hopefully, it won't even take five days." The current issue with the propane terminal is tied to attempts to "do the tie-ins with the new Wärtsiläs," WAPA's new CEO explained. "But that's not a prolonged problem," he assured. A short time later, he mentioned that he had been contacted by his team, who explained the issue. "That's going to be shut down until Friday," Mr. Knight confirmed, referring to the propane system. "If we can get all three units running, we will be able to get off rotating power. It is a little bit of a growing pain as we try to get the new units commissioned."

He reiterated: "We expect the rotation to end no later than Friday. On Friday we should be turning back on the propane system, and even if we fail to get Unit 23 functioning by then, we should be able to carry the islands (STT-STJ) once again."

With WAPA running generation for St. John and St. Thomas with three units for the next five months until the four new Wartsila generators have completed their generation process, the authority must navigate a precarious balancing act. The loss of any of the three units will result in the rolling blackout scenario currently being experienced.