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Vegetation and Manpower Issues Hampered WAPA's Post-Ernesto Recovery, Says CEO Karl Knight

WAPA CEO Karl Knight admits that inadequate vegetation maintenance and a shortage of linemen on St. Thomas significantly slowed post-Ernesto power restoration efforts, costing the Authority time and money

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Dept. of Public Works employees trim vegetation and clear the Queen Mary Highway in Barren Spot area following TS Ernesto earlier this month. By. ERNICE GILBERT, V.I. CONSORTIUM

“Our one significant point of failure was the lack of adequate preventative vegetation maintenance prior to the storm,” was the assessment of Water and Power Authority CEO Karl Knight, as he

provided members of WAPA's Governing Board with a recap of the utility's performance during and after Ernesto on Thursday.?

"I think we hurt ourselves a lot by not being able to keep up with the vegetation," he further stated later during discussion. "I can only imagine how quickly our restoration could have gone if our linemen didn't have to spend as much time cutting back trees as we ultimately had to." He added, "Vegetation management has cost the Authority a lot of money; not even with just this event, just overall. Losing power because of vegetation is problematic."

?Compounding the issue caused by overgrown vegetation, "the event also found us with what I consider to be a shortage of manpower in the line department on St. Thomas," Mr. Knight said. As a result, efforts to restore power after the storm required heroic levels of commitment from employees. "The line crews, they worked about five consecutive shifts of 12 hours plus starting Wednesday through Sunday," Mr. Knight said during his update.

Flooding also posed a challenge, WAPA's CEO said.

According to Mr. Knight, plans to address both issues come down to one common factor - human resources. Although the company currently either has the necessary equipment to manage vegetation or has access to such, "what remains to be seen is can we get the bodies and can we get the training?" he wondered. Mr. Knight contemplated the idea of contracting the service out, "even if it's during the run up to the storm season, as opposed to a year-round engagement." For this season, at least, the vegetation issue has been stabilized, he said. After Ernesto, "we didn't just trim trees. In some instances, we actually pushed back the tree line," he said. "And that's going to bode well for us."

When it came to boosting the numbers of linemen, Mr. Knight said it was a matter of intensifying recruiting efforts. Being a lineman was a "great profession" for a high school graduate, he remarked, "once you have the acumen and the aptitude, it's a great career that can take you many places." What WAPA needed to do, he said, was find effective ways to share that message with young people in the territory. "I'll be huddling with the team as part of the after action to let folks know we're looking for a few good men and women to join our line department."

However, as Virgin Islanders are all too keenly aware, Ernesto was merely one acute event in a long-running series of crises for WAPA. Before the storm, St. Thomas and St. John were on [rotating outages](#) due to a variety of factors. Now, it is St. Croix's turn to endure [power rotations](#), with the risk of unplanned outages ever present across the territory.

While timely tree-trimming and additional capacity when it comes to line crews will help WAPA in its quest for operational stability, the utility will obviously need much more than that.