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WAPA Grapples with Inoperable Equipment and Poor Maintenance, Plans Vegetation Management Solution

Aging infrastructure and delayed maintenance strain WAPA's power grid, but the agency plans to address power line disruptions with federal funding for vegetation management and dedicated tree-trimming teams

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WAPA CEO Karl Knight. By. V.I. LEGISLATURE

Several key pieces of infrastructure necessary for operations at the Water and Power Authority are currently inoperable, WAPA CEO Karl Knight told lawmakers on the Senate Committee on Disaster Recovery, Infrastructure and Planning on Thursday.?

Submarine lines in the St. Thomas/ St. John district [are compromised](#), and at the Randolph Harley power plant, gas turbine 14 does not work. “Several breaker cubicles were damaged and deemed inoperable” at the Donald Francois substation. At the East End substation, “the power transformer connecting transmission and distribution assets...is also inoperable.” In St. Croix, “the power transformer at the Richmond Power Plant that connects generation, transmission and distribution assets is inoperable,” Mr. Knight disclosed.?

Some of WAPA’s current challenges are a consequence of a failure to maintain infrastructure on time. “Many of our legacy generating units have exceeded their expected lifespan, with several overdue for maintenance or major overhauls,” reported Mr. Knight, [echoing the sentiments](#) of his predecessor. “Preventative maintenance activities are often delayed due to shortages of manpower,” he added. With several units without any attention in twelve years, WAPA now reports “diminished performance and reduced capacity” worsened by the 2017 hurricanes.

These issues are exacerbated by instances of trees and overgrown vegetation downing power lines. According to Senator Marvin Blyden, “failure to carry out proper vegetation management is the single largest cause of power outages, besides fuel.” He cited information from the Federal Emergency Management Agency. Then-tropical storm Ernesto “[showed] us what happens when you do not do proper management when it comes to mitigation,” he added.

Mr. Knight, who [previously acknowledged](#) that this is a major issue, informed lawmakers that WAPA is working to secure federal funding to manage overgrown vegetation. “I intend to use that to make sure we have proper equipment, including the tree trimming trucks, and to make sure we also train the crews.” While the Department of Public Works is responsible for clearing roadway vegetation, they are restricted to trimming only up to 5 feet of brush on WAPA’s poles. WAPA, however, does not routinely complete its part of the task.

“On St. Croix, I’ll be able to create a small tree trimming outfit and get back to WAPA doing regular tree trimming year-round,” shared Mr. Knight. Meanwhile on St. Thomas, a full-time tree trimming team will be supplemented by contractors. WAPA’s last tree-trimming contract ended in 2020, and a timeline for a new one was not announced during Thursday’s hearing of the Committee on Disaster Recovery, Infrastructure, and Planning.

During Governor Albert Bryan's [widely viewed interview](#) with the Consortium's Ernice Gilbert last week, Mr. Gilbert pressed the governor for several minutes on government inaction relative to vegetation maintenance.

For Mr. Blyden, contracting a tree trimming service would cost significantly less than the revenue WAPA loses during power outages. Mr. Knight agreed. “It’s worth the investment...I’m going to make the investment.” After Ernesto, inoperable meters were caused by “vegetation management issues.”

?“[If you] have two or three people maintaining that every day, that’s way cheaper than them blowing out and you having to figure out how to get them back,” advised Senator Alma Francis Heyliger. She noted that WAPA could “potentially mitigate bigger problems if we could focus on the smaller ones.”