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Districtwide Power Outage Hits St. Thomas and St. John; WAPA Says Loss of Generation and Inability to Meet Demand Triggered Blackout

The outage on Wed. night left both St. Thomas and St. John in the dark. WAPA cited excessive demand during high heat and the failure of Unit 15 as contributing factors, while noting restoration efforts are underway without a set completion time.

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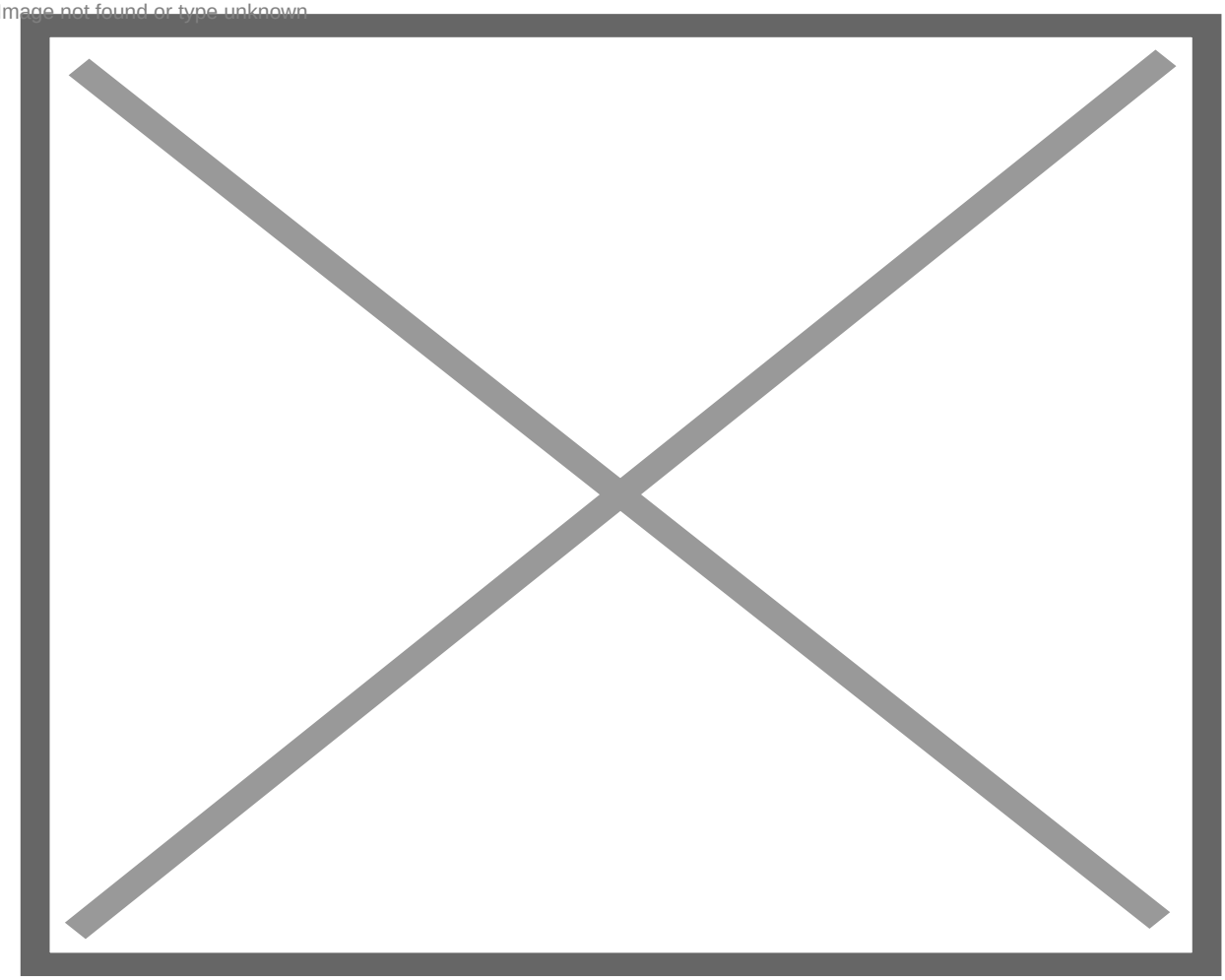

The Randolph Harley Power Plant in St. Thomas, USVI. By. ERNICE GILBERT, V.I. CONSORTIUM.

ST. THOMAS — The V.I. Water and Power Authority reported a districtwide outage on Wednesday evening affecting all customers on St. Thomas and St. John. In a 7:11 p.m. alert,

WAPA said personnel were working to restore electricity and that the estimated restoration time was unknown.

Speaking with the Consortium shortly before the alert, Shanell Petersen, WAPA’s director of corporate communications, said the territory was “coming from a blackout,” noting that generation at the Randolph Harley power plant was lost during an attempt to start Unit 15. “We lost the the generators, or the generation at the power plant when we attempted to start up unit 15. So right now we're coming from a blackout, so it's going to take a little bit of time to restore power,” she said. The status of the unit remained under review: “They're still assessing.”

Petersen outlined the sequence that led to the broader failure. An under-frequency event occurred first, when demand exceeded available generation, tripping several feeders. “Initially the outage was due to under frequency, so there was more consumption than power, more demand than generation, and that's why some feeders went out,” she explained. The districtwide outage followed when “we attempted to start unit 15.” She added that it was unclear whether extra consumption prevented the unit from starting, saying, “we can't say whether that's why unit 15 didn't come on yet,” while confirming, “we just weren't producing enough power at the time of the initial outage that impacted several feeders.”

Asked whether higher demand is a new challenge for St. Thomas, Petersen said summer heat routinely strains the system. The pattern, she noted, is most pronounced in the hotter months, including September, when units work harder and customers typically use more electricity, especially for cooling. By contrast, “high season” from a population standpoint can see less overall power use because “most people start to turn off their ACs, or they don't have them on as high or as long.”

Petersen also pointed to measures that have helped limit outages and under-frequency events in recent months, including solar farms supplying additional power and battery installations at the Randolph Harley power plant. Those resources, she said, have “assisted over the last few months,” and the utility continues to manage system conditions on an ongoing basis.