

logo not found or type unknown

WAPA CEO Cites Bad Luck and Aging Units for St. Thomas Outages, While Governor Points to Propane Transition Problems

Karl Knight told the board that deferred maintenance, equipment failures, and extreme heat have stretched capacity. Governor Bryan, however, said outages are also tied to failures in converting Wärtsilä units to propane, complicating grid reliability.

WAPA / **Published On September 19, 2025 05:00 AM /**

Janeka Simon **September 19, 2025**

Image not found or type unknown



An aerial view of the Randolph Harley power plant in St. Thomas. By. ERNICE GILBERT, V.I. CONSORTIUM.

The series of recent power outages on St. Thomas were caused by a “run of bad luck” after the authority had been “flirting with disaster the last few weeks,” stated Karl Knight, chief executive

of the Water and Power Authority during WAPA's Thursday governing board meeting. However, public comments from Governor Albert Bryan Jr. in a different forum add a new dimension to WAPA's recent struggles with maintaining a stable power grid.

During the meeting, Mr. Knight disclosed that at the Randolph Harley power plant, two generating units – #23 and #27 – have been down for several weeks. “Any shortfall in generation has prompted us to have to rotate and load shed in order to meet capacity,” he explained. The unrelenting heat has spiked demand for power, “and so [capacity has been really stretched](#),” he noted.

Mr. Knight once again emphasized that the current struggle to keep these older units online is because “deferred maintenance over time has caught up to us...we are not able to take down our legacy units for complete major overhauls,” he told board members. “As we fix one component, some other component becomes due for repairs, and so we've had our challenges.”

The WAPA CEO also disclosed that an issue with the air delivery system on one Wärtsilä generator earlier this week “caused the other unaffected units to also trip offline because...they share the common air system.”

Engineers were able to restore unit #27 into service this week as well, Mr. Knight said. During Thursday's intense rain, localized outages on St. Croix due to lightning strikes disrupted the grid somewhat, and caused fatal damage to at least one transformer, he noted. “But for the most part, the system held up the way it should. It protected itself when it was struck by lightning, and we were able to restore the system, restore those feeders in short order.”

On St. Thomas, the rain caused “water intrusion into components of unit 15 that knocked unit 15 offline,” Mr. Knight said. This was problematic, as this unit is one which can be started even when the entire plant is down. “Unit 15...allows us to black start,” the CEO said. “The grid did become unstable once 15 dropped off, so we lost the Wärtsiläs , and then trying to black start posed a little bit of a challenge,” he explained.

According to Mr. Knight, the territory's electricity woes have been caused by “a series of not-necessarily related incidents...most of it having to do with a shortfall of generation capacity.” He says that Unit 27's restoration “should give us breathing room” in terms of capacity to maintain the grid if other units fail or need to be taken out of service. “We should be in a better position, believe it or not, moving forward, than we've been in the last couple of weeks.”

However, Governor Bryan said that there was another part of the story that was not being disclosed. According to WTJX, while speaking to Analyze This with Neville James, Mr. Bryan said, “What they're not telling people in St. Thomas is they're trying to convert the Wartsilas over to the propane, and they're having failures on the propane side, which is turning off the plant.” Governor Bryan likened the scenario to “growing pains” as WAPA works out the kinks in the propane transition. While Mr. Knight did not mention challenges with the propane conversion during his oral presentation in Thursday's board meeting, it is unclear whether it was discussed in his written executive director's report that was submitted to board members ahead of time.