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WAPA Says Weekend Blackouts a One-Off; Promises More Stability, Praises Employees For Finding Solution

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Aerial shot of WAPA's power plant on St. Croix By. ERNICE GILBERT/VI CONSORTIUM

ST. CROIX — When St. Croix went dark at 2:00 p.m. on Saturday, residents were understandably angered. It was another experience of being without power from a water and power company where such occurrences had been experienced many times before. What's worse, people have been ordered to stay home by the government in an effort to blunt the spread of the novel coronavirus. Doing so without power is a tall order.

But WAPA on Sunday afternoon, during a call-in press event with the media, shared some pertinent details about the outages, including why the blackouts were a one-off, and it also shared details about the efforts of employees — often overshadowed — that led to the eventual

restoration of electricity.

WAPA Executive Director Lawrence Kupfer spoke to the outages, while Clinton Hedrington, Jr., chief operating officer of Electric Systems, went into deeper detail and also spoke on the employees' efforts.

Mr. Kupfer said the outages were not related to the generation units per se. Rather, they were related to the power supply system that provides power to auxiliary equipment that support the generators. These include pumps, fans and air compressors, for example.

"We had a failure in that power supply system and thereby lost the auxiliary equipment to support what was running at the time, which was units 17 and 20," Mr. Kupfer said. The auxiliary equipment also facilitate power supply to other parts of the Estate Richmond Plant, including air conditioning for the control room and lighting around the plant."

When the auxiliary equipment failed, WAPA had to scramble to find an alternative way to provide auxiliary power to those units, including running a portable air compressor, Mr. Kupfer explained. He said the alternative allowed the utility to restore power on Saturday night.

But after power returned the first time, it went off again — and again — prompting deep frustration from the community, as posts began popping up on social media with virtually all expressing vile sentiments toward WAPA.

Mr. Kuper said the reason power was lost after it initially came on was because the demand for electricity at the time was high, as customers had been without power for half of the day. "Customers were demanding power in excess of the two generators that we had online — Units 17 and 20 — and that caused some additional outages, which we were able to correct once we got the Aggreko Units online and the peak demand fell off a little bit," the executive director said.

As for the power outage the following morning — Sunday at 5:00 a.m. — Mr. Kupfer said the portable air compressor the authority had been using failed, causing Unit 20 to trip again. WAPA employees, however, were able to get it restarted after rectifying a fuel system issue. Furthermore, WAPA called on the territory's major construction firms to provide it with a portable compressor, and at about 10:00 a.m. Sunday, J. Benton Construction, LLC delivered to the authority a backup portable compressor which has since been installed.

Mr. Hedrington, who went into further detail and complexities of power generation, also took some time to praise the WAPA employees for bringing power back on.

"The process of putting the plant back together after such a failure is a lengthy process," Mr. Hendrington made known. He later added, "The guys in the power plant worked long and hard with no air conditioning, no power in the plant itself, and I think they should be commended for the hard work and the intelligence that they [brought] to restore power to the island of St. Croix."

Asked by the Consortium whether last weekend's blackouts were a one-off, or whether the instability would persist, Mr. Kupfer said, "I think we should look at this as a one-off type situation. Again, all of our four generators are in good shape. We've had a project the last couple months to build a new supply system and we should have that in service in the next month to a month and a half, and that will be a brand new supply system, which then should make this auxiliary supply system much more reliable."

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