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Aging Generator Blamed for St. Thomas-St. John Blackouts as WAPA Eyes Wednesday Recovery

WAPA CEO Karl Knight said a mechanical failure at Unit 15 left the Randolph Harley Power Plant about 5 megawatts short of peak demand, forcing rotational outages across St. Thomas and St. John while repairs continue around the clock.

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V.I. Water and Power Authority CEO Karl Knight says that consumers in the St. Thomas-St. John district may find relief from rotational outages by mid-week.

Mr. Knight, speaking at Monday's Government House press briefing, says that the source of the problem which began last Thursday was the mechanical failure of an aging power generator at the Randall Harley Power Plant.

Unit 15 typically provides approximately 18 megawatts of power, Mr. Knight disclosed. When it failed around midday on Thursday, it left the plant unable to meet the power needs of the district. Without Unit 15, the power plant is falling short of peak demand by about 5 megawatts. “I know these outages have been frustrating,” Mr. Knight said, acknowledging the disruption to schools, workplaces, and households. “I assure you that our plant personnel are working around the clock to resume our full service.”

When it was installed in 1980, Unit 15 had an operational life expectancy of 30 years. Almost 46 years later, the issue becomes self-evident. “This is not an issue related to fuel. This is not an issue related to payment or financial issues,” Mr. Knight clarified, seeking to distance the current crisis from WAPA’s past fiscal woes. “This is simply a matter of aging infrastructure that we continue to do our best to maintain.” Equipment failures due to [aging infrastructure and long-deferred maintenance](#) is not new to WAPA. “Our plant personnel are doing a yeoman’s job in keeping these units functioning until such time as we can get proper replacement,” Mr. Knight stated.

Repairs to Unit 15 are ongoing. Mr. Knight disclosed that one critical replacement part was sourced from St. Croix, while another must be procured from outside the territory. If operations proceed as planned, the supply of power to the district could return to normal sometime on Wednesday. Otherwise, residents and businesses must continue to contend with the current system of rolling blackouts. A long-term solution that is “tantalizingly close” to coming to fruition is the permanent replacement of Units 14 and 15. The project will be funded through the Federal Emergency Management Agency, and managed by the Office of Disaster Recovery. In the interim, WAPA is also exploring FEMA-funded temporary generation options that could provide some “breathing room” until the permanent replacements are ready for service.

From a broader perspective, ensuring the reliability of service to St. John continues to be a high priority for WAPA. Mr. Knight announced a community meeting on Tuesday evening to present a “plan of action” developed in conjunction with the Office of the Governor. This plan makes provisions for immediate and long-term solutions for St. John’s power needs.