

WAPA Says Stressed System, Deferred Maintenance and Unit Failures Drove District Power Crisis

At its second major legislative hearing in seven months, WAPA said storms, mechanical failures, a cut transmission line, a fire and weak generation combined to deepen the St. Thomas-St. John crisis as senators pressed for timelines, funding and relief.

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

For the second time in seven months, Water and Power Authority leadership returned to the Legislature to explain another major power crisis in the St. Thomas-St. John district — one WAPA says was driven not by a single failure, but by storms, equipment breakdowns, a cut transmission line, a fire, weak generation capacity, and years of deferred maintenance on an

already strained system.

During Thursday's hearing, CEO Karl Knight walked lawmakers through the chain of events behind the outages, outlined short-, intermediate, and long-term projects aimed at stabilizing service, and faced senators who said plans alone are no longer enough without timelines, funding answers, and relief residents can actually feel.

It has now become routine for the Legislature to demand answers from WAPA, but the crisis persists.

"The last two months have been difficult, plain and simple," stated Karl Knight, WAPA's chief executive officer. He told lawmakers that the reason residents were plunged into darkness was "not one issue, but a series of events, back-to-back, that exposed the fragility of an already stressed system."

In September 2025, Mr. Knight blamed outages on a "[run of bad luck](#)." [In October](#), he ascribed the blackouts to a "lack of preventative and routine maintenance that has left the authority vulnerable to equipment failures."

During Thursday's meeting, he provided a timeline of mishaps that began with "intense thunderstorms" in February. Then, a mechanical failure on the underground portion of Feeder 13 left many Virgin Islanders without power. On February 6, the transmission line between Red Hook and Cruz Bay tripped, resulting in an islandwide outage. Then, on March 14, WAPA discovered that the same transmission line had been "deliberately cut."

After that line was restored, a fire in the junction box at Red Hook disrupted service once more.

What followed was a "two-and-a-half-week prolonged period of rotational outages," caused by the "inability of the Randolph Harley Power Plant to produce sufficient power" to meet demand in the St. Thomas-St. John district. A critical generation unit, Unit 15, failed on March 19, and without sufficient support from other units, the issue persisted.

Several units had already been taken offline for maintenance before the March 19 failure, leaving the Authority in a precarious position. WAPA continues to operate with several aged generation units, some of which should have been decommissioned some time ago.

"This was not neglect," said Mr. Knight. "This was a system under pressure responding to multiple compounding failures."

Still, he acknowledged that residents are not interested in explanations, but in solutions.

WAPA has therefore proposed a series of projects that it says are intended to address the territory's power problems.

Among the short-term plans is the installation of emergency standby generation for St. John, a FEMA-funded project. WAPA is "pursuing an expedited path" for that work. The authority also plans to repair the Great Bay submarine transmission line, which was damaged years ago, though that project is currently unfunded. WAPA also wants to carry out temporary repairs to the Ridge Road Distribution Circuit at Cabrita Point, but has not yet identified funding for that work. Lawmakers were told FEMA will eventually fund its permanent repair at some point in the future.

Within the next 6 to 24 months, WAPA intends to install temporary generation and additional battery energy storage at the Randolph Harley Power Plant. The authority is also looking ahead to solar farm development in Bovoni and Fortuna estates. On St. John, VIElectron is also pursuing development of a 1-megawatt solar farm.

Long-term plans include development of the St. John microgrid, which is currently in the design phase, the permanent replacement of Units 14 and 15, and the rebuild of Transmission Feeders 11 and 12. WAPA also plans to develop the St. Thomas Bovoni Eastern BESS & Microgrid Project to “provide an alternative energy source to a portion of southeastern St. Thomas.”

Lawmakers said they were encouraged to hear of the projects, but several made clear that they wanted concrete deadlines.

“When folks come here to the Legislature, and you tell me of all your plans, I need to hear timeline,” demanded Senator Franklin Johnson.

Some of the projects discussed are federally funded. Others will require WAPA to find money on its own. Mr. Knight testified that the Authority has been consistently “losing money on every barrel of oil it purchases.” He said the problem cannot be solved by “simply raising rates.”

He lamented that “the gap has been managed for over a decade by deferring maintenance, prioritizing critical vendor payments, [and] cutting operating budgets.” Those decisions, he said, have led to “inadequate staffing, a shortage of tools and equipment, a shortage of fleet vehicles, and inadequate training.”

Those deferrals and cuts have now caught up with the agency, leaving WAPA in a quagmire.

Senator Alma Francis Heyliger sounded defeated. “WAPA don't run good,” she said. “I feel like I'm being held hostage by a company. I am paying for a service that is so lousy that I don't even have a choice but to accept it,” she lamented.

Thursday's discussion followed the now-familiar pattern of WAPA hearings. Lawmakers expressed frustration over repeated outages, recounted complaints from constituents, and questioned the Authority's ability to stabilize service. WAPA leadership described its operational and financial difficulties and pledged to pursue the listed projects.

Repeated attention was also given to the consequences of deferred maintenance that are now affecting thousands of Virgin Islanders.

One notable moment came from Senator Ray Fonseca, who signaled a willingness to support funding for specific WAPA projects.

“I would support, colleagues, that we find out what it would cost to get [Unit] 23 and 15 and Feeder 13 and the St John transmission line.”

Senator Angel Bolques is reportedly preparing legislation to support WAPA in some way, and Senator Fonseca appeared interested in joining that effort.

“I think we probably can tap the Budget Stabilization Fund,” he said. The Finance Committee chair did not comment.

The remark marked an apparent shift for Senator Fonseca, who in the past has opposed directing more money to WAPA's operations, preferring instead that proposed funding go to the territory's healthcare facilities.

For now, Virgin Islanders are waiting for the promised relief from the short-term projects WAPA has identified. However, Sandra Setorie, executive director of the Public Services Commission, has warned that few of the projects outlined by Mr. Knight will provide immediate comfort.

"The only existing short-term projects which offer relief are the solar projects at Fortuna and Bovoni," she warned.