

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Drought Effect: Dry Tree Branches Falling On WAPA Lines Causing Power Outages

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The months-long drought affecting the Virgin Islands is having a negative impact on the transmission and distribution systems of the Virgin Islands Water and Power Authority, according to a press release the semi-autonomous entity issued on Thursday.

The systems are being affected by both fallen tree branches and the build-up of salt air residue on power lines, switches, insulators and other hardware exposed to the elements.

On Thursday, WAPA Executive Director Hugo V. Hodge, Jr. explained that the continued drought, evident for months now, has caused branches and limbs on some of the

territory's larger trees to become dry and brittle. As a result, they are breaking and impacting the primary electrical lines across the territory.

"We are seeing this trend more and more along the west end of St. Croix where the system is regularly impacted by falling tree branches and limbs," Hodge said, adding, that feeders 6B, 8B, 9B and 10B are being most affected by the effects of the drought. On St. Thomas, where the issue of dead tree limbs impacting the system is to a lesser extent, the Ridge Road feeder and feeder 9D have been most affected by these incidents.

The impact of broken branches and limbs with the system causes surges back to the power plants which result in short-lived outages on the feeders.

"There have been a general increase in the number of electrical service interruptions over the last few months, and as our Line Department crews are dispatched to investigate, we are finding the downed tree limbs and branches to be the cause of these service interruptions," Hodge added.

In addition, he noted that the continued lack of significant rainfall activity is causing a build-up of salt air residue on the system's infrastructure.

"The lack of regular rainfall, which ordinarily acts as a flushing agent for the electrical distribution system, has resulted in a build-up of residue and corrosion, not only on the primary lines but on other electrical system hardware along the distribution routes in both island districts. The crews in the field are reporting evidence of the residue build up on our systems as a result of the lack of any meaningful rainfall activity," Hodge went on.

Also on St. Thomas, there have been issues with a couple of the WAPA's generating units which have contributed to short-lived service interruptions, primarily feeders: 6A, 7A, 9C and 7B.

"Over the last few weeks we have had a few challenges with Unit 15's excitation, but we believe that we have sorted them out and stabilized the unit. We are also working to overcome some issues with the quality of fuel oil being burned by Unit 25, a generating unit that is leased by WAPA."

He said plant personnel have recently noticed some particulates in the fuel supply, contributing to Unit 25 falling offline.

"While the unit is more efficient, it is also more sensitive and has been reacting to the particulates that have been discovered in our fuel supply. The effect on the unit causes it to fall offline and later be restarted. When Unit 25 fails and has to be restarted or another unit has to be brought online to meet power demand, we are faced with the short electrical service interruptions."

Hodge apologized to the customers and reassured the community that all efforts are being made to stabilize the electrical generation and distribution systems on both island districts in an effort "to provide the kind of consistent electrical service that our customers expect."