

The Virgin Islands Consortium

St. Thomas-St. John Blackout Caused By Human Error, Fault On Feeder, WAPA CEO Says

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ST. THOMAS -- Interim Executive Director of the Virgin Islands Water and Power Authority, Julio Rhymer, Sr. said Wednesday that a fault on Feeder 7A along with human error at the Randolph Harley Power Plant were the cause of an eight hour district-wide service interruption Sunday night, W.A.P.A. said via press release this afternoon. The findings were made public following an initial investigation by the Authority's Transmission and Distribution Division. A subsequent investigation is continuing by the plant superintendent and his staff.

"As the interim head of this utility, it is incumbent upon me to update the public on our findings to date and to present a summary of the circumstances that led to the most

recent service interruption which disrupted the lives of our customers across the entire island district and represented loss of revenue for WAPA,” Mr. Rhymer said.

He noted that two distinct events occurred which led to the district-wide service interruption of April 10:

- Feeder 7A experienced a fault in the vicinity of Estate Altona. The feeder's relay monitors and protects the feeder from abnormalities on the distribution system. The relay allowed the fault to remain on the line for a longer period than required resulting in the loss of Unit 23 and other feeders to include Feeder 7A. When Unit 23 fell off line, the power system became unstable, however, two other units on-line at the time, Units 25 and 18, would have met most of the power demand with the exception of a couple of feeders.
- The power plant control room operator acted in error by attempting to close or re-energize Feeder 7A without first ensuring that the fault was cleared. This action resulted in a reoccurrence, this time sidelining both remaining generating units, knocking out all remaining feeders and leading to the district-wide electric service interruption.

In regards to the fault on Feeder 7A, WAPA's Transmission and Distribution personnel found that the feeder relay allowed the fault to remain longer than normal which contributed to some burned and fallen lines that were discovered along the feeder path. The feeder runs from the Randolph Harley power plant to just east of Estate Altona and north to Solberg, St. Peter Mountain and along a portion of the north side of the island.

Mr. Rhymer said that WAPA maintains standard operating procedures governing all facets of its plant operations and re-energizing a faulted feeder falls outside the parameters of those procedures. “We expect that our employees will take actions that are in line with our tried and tested operating procedures and make decisions that are consistent with their training. We will review all recommendations and take disciplinary actions that are justified for the human error of Sunday night.”

He added that he is mindful that this is the second time in less than four months that human error has contributed to an island wide service interruption which lasted for several hours and adversely affected our customers. “These types of errors are not acceptable to me, our fellow employees, or to the ratepayers of WAPA--they will not be condoned or accepted.”

Mr. Rhymer said while he is not at liberty to publicly discuss personnel matters, such as disciplinary action meted out to employees, the public can rest assured that employees are expected to perform in a manner consistent with their training and within the Authority's operating procedures, and he emphasized that the majority of employees do comply with these procedures. Any action short of that will be grounds for disciplinary action. “There must be across the board accountability for every one of the Authority's employees as we are all in service to our customers and to the community in which we live.”

Mr. Rhymer also said he intends to meet with the plant superintendent post haste to determine what can be done to lessen the recovery period after an island wide service interruption. “I noticed in December and again on Sunday that the recovery extends over

too long a period of time. Plant personnel and I will meet to determine what can be done to streamline this process. Should this require purchasing additional equipment to ensure that our units can be “black started” more quickly, we will seek out funding to ensure that whatever is needed is on hand to more efficiently recover our systems following a large-scale service interruption,” he said.

Mr. Rhymer again apologized to the public for the inconvenience caused by Sunday’s service interruption and repeated his thanks and appreciation to the many employees of WAPA who reported to the power plant on a Sunday to take whatever measures were necessary to restore electric service to the Authority’s customers.

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