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Outages Will Continue for Weeks to Come, WAPA Chief Says; On St. Thomas, Blackouts Narrowed To Two Leased Generators

Top Stories / **Published On September 17, 2019 07:13 AM /**

VIC **September 17, 2019**

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Virgin Islands Water and Power Authority Plant in Richmond, St. Croix By. Ernice Gilbert, VIC

If you have not had enough of the near-daily power outages that accompany monthly electric bills, well, be prepared. There are more to come.

Virgin Islands Water and Power Authority (WAPA) Executive Director Lawrence Kupfer said Monday that residential and business customers can expect the regular loss of

electricity in the St. Thomas-St. John District, and potentially, St. Croix, for weeks ahead.

“Weeks. Not a couple of months or a couple of years,” Mr. Kupfer assured the public during the weekly Government House press briefing, held on St. Croix yesterday. “We think there are technical solutions that will not be long-term, but it might be a couple of weeks.”

Thousands of WAPA customers in both districts have been left without electricity on a routine basis for months now. The inability of WAPA to provide consistent utility service has cost the central government credibility, but has taken a larger toll on residents and businesses at the mercy of an unreliable power company.

Mr. Kupfer announced last week that the New York Power Authority deployed a team of subject matter experts to the Virgin Islands to assist WAPA and contractor engineers in developing solutions to the current generation challenges.

WAPA Exec: ‘Short-Term Fixes to ... You Know, Keep The Power On’

“We don’t know all of the issues yet,” the WAPA chief said. However, the working premise is that there is a problem with the fuel system for two leased generators on St. Thomas. “When there is instability, these fuel pumps are not responding in order to keep the generators on line.”

According to Mr. Kupfer, “ ... We think we’ve narrowed it down to these units. So we hope there is going to be some short-term fixes to eliminate that instability and, you know, keep the power on.”

There are also the substation problems. St. Thomas has four electrical substations. One in the east end of the island, near Red Hook, was destroyed by Irma and is currently being rebuilt, Mr. Kupfer said. At the substation near Long Bay, “ ... about half of the equipment is damaged. Normally, substations have two 100 percent systems. If one fails, you can still keep the substation in service. Since half the equipment is damaged, anytime there is a failure, we lose that entire substation until we can get it fixed.”

Only last week did WAPA retain the services of insurance consultants to help recovery damages to insured equipment broken by Hurricanes Irma and Maria two years ago. The authority's engineers estimated damage to insured assets was a mere \$3.5 million. Insurance proceeds were never sought by WAPA.