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WAPA Receives Near Universal Praise For Performance During Tropical Storm Fiona; New CEO Explains Success

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Aerial shot of the V.I. Water and Power Authority Richmond Plant. By. ERNICE GILBERT/ V.I. CONSORTIUM

With strong winds and rain during what was then Tropical Storm Fiona pounding St. Croix Saturday night into Sunday, many residents were caught off guard not by the storm, but by the V.I. Water and Power Authority's performance during the weather system.

A majority of residents, including this reporter, were quite astonished that WAPA managed to keep the power on as the rain continued nonstop accompanied by sometimes winds as strong as 45 mph, and even higher gusts.

The performance wasn't perfect as several feeders lost power during the storm, and some residents reported hourslong outages. But it was notable nonetheless compared to past executions, and the authority's CEO, Andrew Smith responded to the Consortium about the strategy that led to the laudable effort.

WAPA has been receiving almost universal praise for its performance during TS Fiona particularly with keeping the power on. What strategies led to this success?

Smith: Several factors led to the improved system performance:

- a) The Authority has been proactively installing switches and other related equipment that isolates outages to smaller and smaller numbers of customers.
- b) We have also been focusing on proactively maintaining our system and replacing equipment that needs to be replaced such that the system is better prepared when weather strikes.
- c) We also continue to install composite poles that can withstand 200 MPH winds as well as moving portions of the transmission system underground. Both initiatives make the system more reliable, and both initiatives are also funded with grants from our federal partners.

Was the success in part due to the storm's impact being minimal in terms of damage?

Smith: It would be disingenuous to say that the strength of the storm didn't help limit the damage, despite the efforts I outlined above. If the storm had been more severe, we likely would have suffered additional outages; however, the proactive steps we have been taking that were outlined above would still help the system perform better, keep the current on, and speed restoration times. One other factor that helped us in the storm is that we had high winds on Saturday morning that resulted in some outages as trees came down and the system suffered other weather-related damage. We were able to undertake significant restoration efforts on Saturday and went into Saturday night with only 697 customers out on STX and zero known outages on STT/STJ. For context we have almost 55,000 electric customers.

Can you speak to some of the proactive measures that led to this outcome?

Smith: I outlined the proactive steps above that helped reduce the number of outages, but one other big initiative at the Authority helped to speed restoration times. At the start of this year, we had approximately 50% of our vehicles out of service. Everything from jeeps and pickup trucks to our heavy-duty bucket trucks and pressure diggers (pressure diggers help dig the hole to plant a pole if a pole needs to be replaced – this is especially critical with the Territory's rocky terrain). For example, we had one bucket truck in operation on STX at the beginning of the year. Going into the storm we had 6 operational trucks on STX. Our pressure digger is in service, and we have reduced the overall vehicle fleet outage to less than 20%.

We've brought about this improvement by directing our very limited cash to fixing our vehicles as well as having new leadership over the garage. We have a standing Wednesday Critical Payments call where the leaders of the various teams within WAPA meet and discuss where we should spend the limited funds we have left over after paying for fuel, payroll, and paying the interest on our debt. We have specifically been spending money on vehicle repairs, and I think we've seen the benefit in our restoration efforts.

Bucket trucks are necessary to make overhead system repairs, but 4-wheel drive pickup trucks and Jeeps also aid in restoration. Those vehicles are used to patrol to identify damage to the system so

that the appropriate equipment (bucket trucks, pressure diggers, etc.) can be dispatched to make the repair. Patrolling before dispatching bucket trucks means that the bucket trucks can target outages more efficiently and we can make more restoration repairs more quickly.

An additional proactive measure that will help in future storms relates to STT/STJ. Our efforts to spend money on vehicle maintenance for STT/STJ are getting results, but not the results that we need. The terrain and tight geography of STT/STJ puts more wear and tear on our vehicles, especially our heavy trucks. We weren't getting the results from our maintenance efforts, so we started setting aside money to pay for new bucket trucks. We also secured a federal grant from the department of the interior (the same grant that paid for the Teslas) for a hybrid bucket truck. Bucket trucks, especially hybrid bucket trucks, are hard to find, but our head of Transmission & Distribution scoured the US looking for trucks and we found two conventional bucket trucks and one hybrid bucket truck about 3 weeks ago and we bought them. They should be in the Territory in the coming weeks. A little bit toward the end of this year's storm season, but these trucks will provide years of service to WAPA and the community.

How prepared is the Authority for a more powerful storm?

Smith: The efforts I outlined above in terms of our system maintenance and the federally funded composite pole project and transmission undergrounding positions us better for a more powerful storm, but a more powerful storm will certainly do more damage to our system. That is unavoidable because as the wind speeds increase, damage will increase. While the damage may be more from a stronger storm, the improved response times and equipment availability will still be there.

I'd like to thank everyone in the WAPA family for their efforts to recover from TS Fiona. Our crews spent hours away from their families in bad weather doing hazardous work and they did so efficiently, and most importantly, safely. I think that speaks loudly to the dedication of the men and women of WAPA.