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Calls Grow For Ouster of Firm Controlling Puerto Rico Power Grid as Half of Island Remains Without Power One Week After Fiona

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Aerial shot of flooding in Salinas, Puerto Rico following the passage of Hurricane Fiona on September 19, 2022. By. ALEJANDRO GRANADILLO

Approximately one week after the Category 1 Hurricane Fiona struck Puerto Rico, half of the island of 3.3 million people is still without power, and there are growing calls for the ouster of Luma — a private firm that took over the island's transmission and distribution operation in 2021.

According to the Associated Press, as of Saturday, an entire town had not seen a single member of a work crew.

Compounding an already dire situation is fuel disruption which has caused gas stations and grocery stores among other business to close early, leaving apartment complexes in the dark because of a shortage of diesel on the island, the AP said.

The situation has left the Puerto Rico public incredulous and frustrated, with many contending that the storm was only a Category 1 hurricane and brought lots of rain — not the level of wind activity that would render a system inoperable for a week.

According to the AP, Marcel Castro-Sitiriche, an electrical engineering professor at the University of Puerto Rico in Mayaguez, stated, “It’s not normal. They have not given a convincing explanation of what the problem is.” He said the Puerto Rico Electric Power Authority and Luma have also not provided basic information to include damage to the electric grid caused by the storm.

As of Saturday, Luma had not brought additional crews to the island to bolster manpower for the recovery effort.

For its part, Luma said floodwaters from Fiona left several power substations underwater and inaccessible, according to the AP. The company also believes that its current manpower is adequate, with Luma engineer Daniel Hernández stating, “We have all the resources we believe we need.”

The AP reported that Edward O’Neill, the mayor of the northern town of Guaynabo, tweeted that Luma’s “bad performance” was “unacceptable.”

In the western Puerto Rico town of Hormigueros whose population totals over 15,600 and many of whom are elderly, Municipal Administrator Yasmín Allende has activated a repairs team. “They haven’t even arrived here,” she said of Luma, revealing that Hormigueros officials provided detailed information to the company, including a list of downed power lines and transformers, and the location of dozens of damaged electric poles. According to Allende, as of Saturday Luma hadn’t even cleared paths around damaged areas to ascertain the speedy restoration of power.

Puerto Rico has an ailing power grid that suffers from lack of maintenance, worn-out infrastructure and the devastating impacts of Hurricane Maria in 2017. The Puerto Rico government’s 15-year contract with Luma [started in June 2021](#) with the promise of improved and more reliable service, even as Luma recognized at the time that the power infrastructure was fragile.