Responding with the Strength of an Industry: Understanding The Electric Power Industry’s National Response Event Plan

For the nation’s electric power industry, no mission is more critical than maintaining a reliable electricity supply. Electricity powers our homes, our businesses and industries, and our way of life. We scarcely think about electricity, unless we don’t have it. Yet, as our use of digital technologies continues to grow, so too does our dependence on electricity.

Given the essential nature of electricity, one of the most challenging tasks that electric utilities face is safely and efficiently restoring power following a major storm, natural disaster, or other outage-triggering event. A speedy restoration process requires significant logistical expertise, along with skilled workers and specialized equipment.

The electric power industry’s mutual assistance network—a voluntary partnership of electric utilities from across the country—leverages the strength, skills, and resources of participating utilities to help restore power after an emergency situation. Through the network, affected electric utilities are able to “borrow” skilled restoration workers—both utility employees and contractors—along with specialized equipment from other utilities that participate in one or more of the industry’s seven Regional Mutual Assistance Groups (RMAGs).

Lessons from Superstorm Sandy

As part of the industry’s commitment to reliability, electric utilities are constantly evaluating their restoration efforts to identify best practices and new opportunities to expedite the response and restoration process. The industry’s unprecedented response to Superstorm Sandy, in the fall of 2012, provided many valuable lessons to apply to significant events in the future.

As many as 10 million customers lost electricity during Sandy, thousands of miles of distribution systems and many transformers were knocked off line, and 24 states suffered damage. In response, the electric power industry came together to repair the incredible damage and to get the lights back on. Eighty electric utilities and tens of thousands of utility workers from around the country and Canada worked around the clock to restore power.

The electric power industry also created an unprecedented industry-government partnership, working in close coordination with the White House, the Departments of Energy, Defense, Homeland Security, and Transportation, along with the Federal Emergency Management Agency, and state and local governments, to expedite restoration efforts.

Another important lesson learned from Sandy was that there were too many small RMAGs in the Northeast. In September 2013, the Mid-Atlantic Mutual Assistance (MAMA), New York Mutual Assistance Group (NYMAG), and the Northeast Mutual Assistance Group (NEMAG) finalized their merger into the North Atlantic Mutual Assistance Group (NAMA)—reducing the total number of RMAGs from nine to seven.
This merger included 21 utilities across 13 states, 1 district, and 4 Canadian provinces. Merging these three smaller RMAGs into one larger RMAG allows better coordination of the resources available to the participating utilities and will increase the ability of the RMAG to provide more self-sustaining support for most local and regional outage events without having to reach out and coordinate across multiple RMAGs.

**Understanding the National Response Event Plan of Action**

In the aftermath of Sandy, the industry recognized the value of enhancing and formalizing the mutual assistance process for events that require a national, industry-wide response. Going forward, when an event requires a national response, the industry will declare an industry-wide “national response event” (NRE). An NRE is a natural or man-made event that is forecast to cause or that causes widespread power outages impacting a significant population or several regions across the U.S. and requires resources from multiple RMAGs.

To address the challenge of this level of outage, the Edison Electric Institute (EEI) and its member electric utility companies developed a new framework and process to coordinate the allocation of restoration workers with the goals of increasing public safety, accelerating the industry’s response, and minimizing economic consequences for consumers and the nation.

Here’s a brief overview of how the NRE process will work:

- In the case of an industry-wide NRE, the industry’s mutual assistance process will be coordinated at the national level in order to ensure industry resources are seamlessly allocated in the most efficient manner possible. For regional or local outages, mutual assistance resources will continue to be managed through the RMAG process.

- A new National Response Executive Committee (NREC), comprised of senior-level utility executives from all regions of the country, will govern the NRE allocation process. Upon request of an affected utility CEO, the NREC will declare an NRE and will activate the National Mutual Assistance Resource Team (NMART).

- The NMART evaluates mutual assistance requests and assigns available resources to affected utilities in coordination with the RMAGs. When an NRE is declared, all available industry emergency restoration resources (including contractors) will be pooled and allocated to participating utilities to best meet restoration needs in a catastrophic event.

- During an NRE, mutual assistance is provided in a coordinated, transparent, and equitable manner to restore power as efficiently and safely as possible for all customers and communities.

- An NRE designation is reserved for only the most significant events, such as a major hurricane, earthquake, an act of war, or other occurrence that results in widespread power outages.

The electric power industry is prepared for significant outage events and continues to improve its coordination and response and recovery efforts. Customers have increasing expectations and electricity dependence, and the industry is committed to making the mutual assistance process efficient, transparent, and equitable regardless of the size and scope of the event.

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*The Edison Electric Institute (EEI) is the association that represents all U.S. investor-owned electric companies. Our members provide electricity for 220 million Americans, operate in all 50 states and the District of Columbia, and directly employ more than 500,000 workers. EEI has 70 international electric companies as Affiliate Members, and 250 industry suppliers and related organizations as Associate Members.*
How the National Response Event Framework Is Different From the Current Mutual Assistance Program

No matter how well prepared the electric power industry is, natural and man-made disasters can cause significant damage to the electric grid, creating widespread power outages. Utilities often turn to the industry’s mutual assistance program—a voluntary partnership of electric utilities from across the country—to help restore power efficiently.

The Mutual Assistance Process

Partnerships in the mutual assistance program are based upon voluntary agreements among electric utilities within the same region, and most agreements are managed by seven Regional Mutual Assistance Groups (RMAGs) throughout the country. When a utility determines that it needs restoration assistance, it initiates a request through an RMAG. (Utilities in the western states coordinate responses directly with each other, rather than through an RMAG.)

RMAGs facilitate the process of identifying available restoration workers and help utilities coordinate the logistics and personnel involved in restoration efforts. RMAGs are organized geographically to meet the needs of neighboring electric utilities during emergency situations most effectively. Although participation is voluntary, each utility in an RMAG has committed, when possible, to send its restoration workers, contractors, and specialized equipment to help other utilities in the network when called upon to do so. If needed, utilities in one RMAG will assist those in another region. By sharing resources among utilities, the RMAGs help to mitigate the risks and costs related to restoring power following major outages.

A New National Response Framework

The current mutual assistance program works well for regional events, but was not designed to be scalable for national events. After Superstorm Sandy, a storm of unprecedented size and scope, the industry enhanced the mutual assistance program to improve how it responds to a natural or man-made event that is forecast to cause or that causes widespread power outages impacting a significant population or several regions across the U.S. and that requires resources from multiple RMAGs.

To meet the challenges of these major national events, the industry has developed a new industry-wide National Response Event (NRE) framework. When an NRE is declared, the industry’s mutual assistance efforts will be scaled to the national level and coordinated so industry restoration resources are allocated in a singular and seamless fashion.

All available emergency restoration resources (including contractors) will be pooled and allocated to participating utilities in a safe, efficient, transparent, and equitable manner. This process is overseen by a new National Response Executive Committee (NREC) comprised of senior-level utility executives from all regions of the country.
How the National Response Event Framework Is Different from the Current Mutual Assistance Program

During an NRE, the NREC will activate a National Mutual Assistance Resource Team (NMART) that will evaluate mutual assistance requests and assign available resources to affected utilities in coordination with the RMAGs. The Edison Electric Institute (EEI) will serve as the industry liaison to EEI member company CEOs, senior government officials, and federal and state regulatory agencies.

EEI will also direct industry public affairs and communication activities in support of restoration efforts and provide communication support to the NREC and NMART. EEI will serve as the electric power industry’s primary national information resource and spokesperson providing a broad, national perspective on the event through media and public relations activities, national outreach, social media support, and industry-wide communication and coordination to relevant stakeholders.

The NRE framework allows the industry to efficiently coordinate and scale its restoration resources to create an industry-wide national response effort while retaining the current, successful, and geographically based RMAG mutual assistance process for events that do not require a national response.
What the National Response Event Framework Will Accomplish

To meet the challenges of major outages that have an industry-wide impact, the electric power industry has developed a new National Response Event (NRE) framework. An NRE is a natural or man-made event that is forecast to cause or that causes widespread power outages impacting a significant population or several regions across the U.S. and requires resources from multiple Regional Mutual Assistance Groups (RMAGs).

When an NRE is declared, the industry’s mutual assistance efforts, which have traditionally addressed regional outages, will be scaled to the national level and coordinated so industry restoration resources are allocated in a singular and seamless fashion. All available emergency restoration resources (including contractors) will be pooled and allocated to participating utilities in a safe, efficient, transparent, and equitable manner.

This process will be overseen by a new National Response Executive Committee (NREC), comprised of senior-level utility executives from all regions of the country. During an NRE, the NREC will activate a National Mutual Assistance Resource Team (NMART) that will evaluate mutual assistance requests and assign available resources to affected utilities in coordination with the RMAGs.

The NRE framework allows the industry to efficiently coordinate and scale its restoration resources to create an industry-wide national response effort while retaining the current, successful, and geographically based RMAG mutual assistance process for events that do not require a national response.

The NRE framework is designed to help increase public safety, accelerate the industry’s response during national events, and minimize economic consequences for consumers and the nation.

However, there are several factors that arise during severe events that cannot be addressed by the NRE process.

- The NRE process coordinates the allocation of restoration workers on a national scale, but it does not create a larger overall pool of qualified restoration workers. The industry is working on workforce development through the Center for Energy Workforce Development and with programs like Troops to Energy Jobs, but these efforts are designed to bring new workers into the industry over time.

- The NRE process is not designed to directly address infrastructure needs. There is no one solution to hardening the infrastructure or making the system more resilient to storms and other events. These decisions are made by utilities and regulatory bodies that determine the most cost-effective measures to strengthen the grid and make it more resilient.
Due to the inherently unpredictable nature of disasters, the NRE process cannot reduce the damage that may occur from severe outage events. The NRE process does scale up the industry’s mutual assistance program to address national level outages and ensures that mutual assistance is safe, efficient, transparent, and equitable.
Electric Power Industry-Government Partnerships Enhance Recovery and Restoration Efforts Following a Significant Outage Event

The electric power industry marshaled an unprecedented national response to help restore service to the millions of customers who lost power in the wake of Superstorm Sandy. Because of the severity of this storm, industry and government officials worked together to remove barriers and to cut through red tape that arose during the response and restoration process.

In the aftermath of Sandy, the electric power industry continues to collaborate and work with the federal government and the states to enhance and formalize industry-government partnerships developed during that storm. These partnerships support the industry’s response and restoration process, especially in the case of events that impact significant populations or several regions and that require resources from multiple Regional Mutual Assistance Groups. Areas of focus include:

**Improving Communication and Coordination**

In order to facilitate and improve information sharing, communication, and coordination during major outages, senior electric power industry officials will be embedded with government response teams at the U.S. Department of Energy and will coordinate with the Federal Emergency Management Agency. This allows a direct, two-way flow of information between industry responders and government emergency managers.

**Streamlining Transportation**

The industry is partnering with the U.S. Department of Transportation and state transportation agencies to expedite the movement of electric utility resources in support of mutual assistance and power restoration. The Edison Electric Institute (EEI), with the support of federal and state governments, is developing information resources and tools to address the specific needs of utilities to move fleets and resources across state lines during a significant outage event.

The industry also has negotiated a new procedure for U.S. and Canadian border crossings with the Department of Homeland Security and the Canadian Border Services Agency to minimize delays and to ensure timely movement of mutual assistance crews across the international border.

**Enhancing Logistical Support, Security, and Road Access**

During Sandy, the U.S. Department of Defense (DOD) assisted the industry by providing airlift for crews and equipment. The industry is currently engaged in an ongoing dialogue with the DOD to build upon the unique capabilities that the military can provide during an emergency.
This effort includes working to expand logistical support, such as access to DOD property and facilities for pre-staging areas, exploring ways to enhance security and road access with the National Guard, and securing access to critical supplies and equipment from the Army Corps of Engineers.

The result of these partnerships is a higher level of collaboration between the electric power industry and government to ensure we are all better prepared for the next major outage event.
National Response Event

Shelf Statement

In the aftermath of Superstorm Sandy, the electric power industry recognized the need to enhance and formalize its mutual assistance process, which is a voluntary partnership of electric utilities from across the country, for events that cause significant power outages and require a national industry-wide response. Going forward, when an event requires a national response, the industry will declare an industry-wide “national response event” (NRE). An NRE is a natural or man-made event that is forecast to cause or that causes widespread power outages impacting a significant population or several regions across the U.S. and requires resources from multiple Regional Mutual Assistance Groups (RMAGs). During an NRE, the industry’s mutual assistance program is coordinated at the national level to deliver a safe, efficient, equitable, and transparent allocation of restoration workers and contractors. The electric power industry is prepared for significant outage events and continues to improve its coordination and response and recovery efforts.

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Understanding the Electric Power Industry’s Response And Restoration Process

Electricity is a crucial product many of us take for granted. We scarcely think about it, unless we don’t have it. Because electricity plays such an important role in our everyday lives, we rely on electric utilities to provide a reliable supply of on-demand power. Utilities constantly plan for emergency situations that could impact their ability to generate or deliver power. And, the industry has a strong track record of maintaining high levels of reliability.

No matter how well the industry is prepared, hurricanes, earthquakes, storms, and other natural and man-made disasters can cause significant damage to the electric grid, creating widespread power outages. Following these events, electric utilities must respond safely, swiftly, and efficiently to restore service to large numbers of affected customers. Utilities often turn to the industry’s mutual assistance program—a voluntary partnership of electric utilities from across the country—to help restore power efficiently. Such was the case in 2012 after Superstorm Sandy, which impacted 24 states and left as many as 10 million customers without power.

Following are frequently asked questions about the industry’s response and restoration process and the steps we are taking to enhance the mutual assistance program to improve public safety, accelerate the industry’s response, and reduce potential economic consequences.

For more information, visit the Edison Electric Institute’s web site at www.eei.org.

How do electric utilities prepare for storms and other events that can cause outages?

Electric utilities’ power restoration and business continuity planning includes year-round preparation for all types of emergencies, including storms and other weather-related events, as well as cyber and physical infrastructure attacks. For example, utilities conduct exercises and drills to prepare them to respond to significant outages—whether they are caused by an expected storm or by an event that occurs without warning.

Restoring power after a major incident is a complex task that must be completed as safely and efficiently as possible. A speedy restoration process requires significant logistical expertise, along with skilled workers and specialized equipment. Electric utilities begin their preparation for weather-related events long before an event actually occurs, with organization-wide plans and drills that involve virtually all employees. When a major storm or natural disaster is expected, electric utilities begin their standard preparations to organize restoration workers, trucks, and equipment.
What is the mutual assistance program?

The mutual assistance program is a voluntary partnership of electric utilities across the country committed to helping restore power whenever and wherever assistance is needed. Created decades ago, the mutual assistance program provides a formal, yet flexible, process for utilities to request support from other utilities in parts of the country that have not been affected by major outage events.

Mutual assistance is an essential part of the electric power industry’s service restoration process and contingency planning. Electric utilities impacted by a major outage event are able to increase the size of their workforce by “borrowing” restoration workers from other utilities. When called upon, a utility will send skilled restoration workers—both utility employees and contractors—along with specialized equipment to help with the restoration efforts of a fellow utility.

How does mutual assistance work?

Partnerships in the mutual assistance program are based upon voluntary agreements among electric utilities within the same region. Most of these agreements are managed by seven Regional Mutual Assistance Groups (RMAGs) throughout the country. When a utility determines that it needs restoration assistance, it initiates a request through an RMAG. (Utilities in the western states coordinate responses directly with each other, rather than through an RMAG.)

RMAGs facilitate the process of identifying available restoration workers and help utilities coordinate the logistics and personnel involved in restoration efforts. For example, RMAGs can help utilities locate specialized skill sets, equipment, or materials, and can assist in identifying other types of resources that may be needed, including lineworkers, tree trimmers, damage assessors, and even call center support.

Utility restoration workers involved in mutual assistance typically travel many miles to help the requesting utility to rebuild power lines, replace poles, and restore power to customers. Before their restoration work begins, the volunteer restoration workers receive any necessary safety training and an overview of the affected facilities from the host electric utility.

How are the RMAGs organized?

RMAGs are organized geographically to meet the needs of electric utilities during emergency situations most effectively. Although participation is voluntary, each utility in an RMAG has committed, when possible, to send its restoration workers, contractors, and specialized equipment to help other utilities in the network when called upon to do so. If needed, utilities in one RMAG will assist those in another region. By sharing resources among utilities, the RMAGs help to mitigate the risks and costs related to restoring power following major outages. Together, the RMAGs enable a consistent, unified response to emergency events that result in a significant loss of power.

How do RMAGs help to maintain electric reliability throughout the country during a major restoration effort?

RMAGs develop contingency plans to ensure that the transfer of resources from one electric utility or region to another has a minimal effect on a regional area if an unexpected event occurs within the service areas of assisting utilities. Contingency plans are developed according to the amount of resources—both restoration workers and equipment—being transferred either to a region or to a larger geographic area.

What are the key goals of the mutual assistance program?

The mutual assistance program serves as an effective—and critical—restoration resource for electric utilities because of its unique structure. It is both flexible and voluntary, empowering the network to respond quickly to the unpredictable nature of weather, while also recognizing that any one utility may be limited in its ability to provide resources at a given point in time.
While a primary goal of the mutual assistance program is to restore electric service in a safe, effective, and efficient manner, the program also serves additional objectives that benefit the entire electric power industry. The mutual assistance program:

- Promotes the safety of employees and customers;
- Strengthens relationships among electric utilities;
- Provides a means for electric utilities to receive competent, trained employees and contractors from other experienced utilities;
- Provides a predefined mechanism to share industry resources expeditiously;
- Mitigates the risks and costs of member utilities related to major incidents;
- Proactively improves resource-sharing during emergency conditions;
- Shares best practices and technologies that help the electric power industry improve its ability to prepare for, and respond to, emergencies;
- Promotes and strengthens communication among RMAGs; and
- Enables a consistent, unified response to emergency events.

What have been some of the largest mutual assistance responses?

The damage done by Superstorm Sandy in October 2012 was unprecedented in its size and scope. Approximately 10 million customers lost power across 24 states in the Northeast, Mid-Atlantic, and parts of the Midwest. In response, the electric power industry deployed an army of tens of thousands of restoration workers—representing 80 utilities from almost every state and Canada. The goal was to restore power as quickly and safely as possible.

The June 2012 derecho—a sudden and widespread storm with peak wind gusts ranging from 80-100 miles per hour—caused more than four million people across Ohio and the Mid-Atlantic to lose power. Utilities responded with a workforce of about 30,000, including local utility workers and crews from as far away as Canada, Texas, and Wyoming.

In August 2011, Hurricane Irene made landfall on the East Coast, leaving approximately nine million customers without power. Nearly 50,000 electric utility restoration workers from as far away as the West Coast and Canada assisted with the restoration efforts in 14 states and the District of Columbia.

When Hurricane Katrina hit the Gulf of Mexico in August 2005, it damaged almost an entire 400-mile section of coastline from central Louisiana, across Mississippi, and into Alabama and western Florida, and destroyed much of the electric power grid in the area. More than 46,000 electric utility restoration workers and contractors from around the country travelled to the Gulf Coast to help the local electric utilities with their monumental restoration effort.

What are electric utilities doing to strengthen the mutual assistance network after Superstorm Sandy?

The electric power industry is committed to strengthening its preparations for, and response to, emergency events that threaten electric service. Electric utilities, contractors, and vendors that provide support or services during outage events meet annually to discuss the outage events that have taken place over the past year; to share lessons learned when responding to storms; and to allow restoration managers to learn about technologies and products that could assist them during future weather-related events.

One of the important lessons learned following Superstorm Sandy was that there were too many small RMAGs in the Northeast. In September 2013, the Mid-Atlantic Mutual Assistance (MAMA), New York Mutual Assistance Group (NYMAG), and the Northeast Mutual Assistance Group (NEMAG) finalized their merger into the North Atlantic Mutual Assistance Group (NAMA)—reducing the total number of RMAGs from nine to seven.
This merger included 21 utilities across 13 states, 1 district, and 4 Canadian provinces. Merging these three smaller RMAGs into one larger RMAG allows better coordination of the resources available to the participating utilities and will increase the ability of the RMAG to provide more self-sustaining support for most local and regional outage events without having to reach out and coordinate across multiple RMAGs.

In the aftermath of Superstorm Sandy, the electric power industry also recognized the need to enhance and formalize the mutual assistance program for national events. In September 2013, the Edison Electric Institute’s Board of Directors approved a framework to institutionalize the lessons learned and best practices from Sandy in order to optimize restoration efforts following events that impact a significant population or several regions across the U.S. and require resources from multiple RMAGs.

**Why was the response and restoration process revised?**

To prepare for severe storms and outage events that cross RMAG boundaries, such as Superstorm Sandy, the industry developed guidelines for responding to large, multi-RMAG or industry-wide National Response Events (NREs). Sandy was the single biggest post-storm restoration the electric power industry had ever undertaken. The damage was catastrophic and widespread. All RMAGs were impacted or involved in the restoration effort.

Prior to Sandy, there was not an industry-wide, national framework in place to respond to storms of this magnitude. Determined to enhance the restoration process, the electric power industry is institutionalizing best practices based on the lessons learned from Sandy. The electric power industry is prepared for significant outage events and continues to improve its coordination and response and recovery efforts. Customers have increasing expectations and electricity dependence, and the industry is committed to making the mutual assistance process safe, efficient, transparent, equitable, and scalable.

**What is an industry-wide National Response Event?**

The most serious outage events are classified by the electric power industry as “national response events” (NREs). An NRE is a natural or man-made event that is forecast to cause or that causes widespread power outages impacting a significant population or several regions across the U.S. and requires resources from multiple RMAGs.

The response and restoration plan for an industry-wide NRE would include a new standing and rotating National Response Executive Committee (NREC), consisting of utility executives representing all regions of the United States. It would also establish an inter-RMAG framework for a national allocation of mutual assistance resources (utility restoration workers, contractors, and spare materials).

When an NRE is declared, all available emergency restoration resources (including contractors) will be pooled and allocated to participating utilities in a safe, efficient, transparent, and equitable manner.

**What triggers an NRE?**

An NRE is a natural or man-made event that is forecast to cause or that causes widespread power outages impacting a significant population or several regions across the U.S. and requires resources from multiple RMAGs.

It’s important to understand an industry-wide NRE designation is reserved only for the most significant events, such as a major hurricane, earthquake, an act of war, or other occurrence that results in widespread power outages.

**What is different about NREs?**

The current mutual assistance program works well for regional events, but was not designed to be scalable for national events. In the case of an industry-wide NRE, the industry’s mutual assistance program will be scaled to a national level so industry restoration resources are allocated in a singular and seamless fashion. The NRE process is overseen by the NREC comprised of senior-level utility executives from all regions of the country.
Understanding the Electric Power Industry’s Response and Restoration Process

During an NRE, the NREC will activate a National Mutual Assistance Resource Team (NMART) that will evaluate mutual assistance requests and assign available resources to participating utilities in coordination with the RMAGs.

For regional or local outages, mutual assistance resources will continue to be managed through the existing RMAG process, which concentrates on providing support across smaller geographic areas.

How has the industry worked with state and federal governments following Superstorm Sandy?

In the aftermath of Sandy, the electric power industry continues to work with the federal government and the states to enhance and formalize industry-government partnerships developed during Sandy that support the industry’s response and restoration process. This is especially critical during events that impact significant populations or multiple regions and that require resources from multiple RMAGs. Areas of focus include:

- Embedding senior industry officials with government response teams at the U.S. Department of Energy to allow a direct, two-way flow of information between industry responders and government emergency managers.
- Partnering with the U.S. Department of Transportation and state transportation agencies to expedite the movement of electric utility resources in support of mutual assistance and power restoration.
- Negotiating a new procedure for U.S. and Canadian border crossings with the Department of Homeland Security and the Canadian Border Services Agency to minimize delays and to ensure timely movement of mutual assistance fleets across the international border.
- Engaging in an ongoing dialogue with the Department of Defense (DOD) to build upon the unique capabilities that the military can provide in an emergency. This effort includes working to expand logistical support such as access to DOD property and facilities for pre-staging areas, exploring ways to enhance security and road access with the National Guard, and securing access to critical supplies and equipment from the Army Corps of Engineers.

What is the role of the states during power restoration efforts?

The states and electric utilities should continue to collaborate and work with first responders to ensure a flexible approach to storms and other events that lead to widespread power outages. A timely restoration effort requires a smooth transition of resources from other regions into the affected area, regardless of the state boundary. Utility service territories often extend beyond state boundaries, and restoration work often involves multiple jurisdictions. Having flexibility to move resources to the outage location is the key to successfully completing a restoration.
Electric Power Industry Mutual Assistance Program

National Response Event Frequently Asked Questions

No matter how well the industry is prepared, hurricanes, earthquakes, storms, and other natural and man-made disasters can cause significant damage to the electric grid, creating widespread power outages. Following these events, electric utilities must respond safely, swiftly, and efficiently to restore service to large numbers of affected customers. Utilities often turn to the industry’s mutual assistance program—a voluntary partnership of electric utilities from across the country—to help restore power efficiently.

Through the mutual assistance program, affected electric utilities are able to “borrow” skilled restoration workers—both utility employees and contractors—along with specialized equipment from other utilities that participate in one or more of the industry’s seven Regional Mutual Assistance Groups (RMAGs).

Such was the case in 2012 after Superstorm Sandy, which impacted 24 states and left as many as 10 million customers without power. In the aftermath of Sandy, the industry recognized the value of enhancing and formalizing the mutual assistance process for events that are national in scope. Going forward, significant outage events requiring an industry-wide, national response will be declared, by the industry, as a “national response event” (NRE).

Following are frequently asked questions about the industry’s NRE framework.

How is an NRE defined?

Only the most serious outage events are classified by the electric power industry as “national response events.” An NRE is a natural or man-made event that is forecast to cause or that causes widespread power outages impacting a significant population or several regions across the U.S. and requires resources from multiple RMAGs.

What triggers an NRE?

A requesting utility’s CEO (or a designated officer) from an EEI member utility may initiate the NRE process if or when multiple RMAGs cannot adequately support the resource requirements.

It’s important to understand an industry-wide NRE designation is reserved only for the most significant events, such as a major hurricane, earthquake, an act of war, or other occurrence that results in widespread power outages.
How does the NRE process work?

When an NRE is declared, all available industry emergency restoration resources (including contractors) will be pooled and allocated to participating utilities to best meet restoration needs in a catastrophic event. A new National Response Executive Committee (NREC), comprised of senior-level utility executives from all regions of the country, will govern the NRE allocation process.

Upon request of an affected utility CEO, the NREC will declare an NRE and will activate the National Mutual Assistance Resource Team (NMART). The NMART evaluates mutual assistance requests and assigns available resources to affected utilities in coordination with the RMAGs. RMAGs will match available resources to the specific utilities based on local requirements. This process will continue periodically until all the outstanding requests are fulfilled.

How are NREs different?

The current mutual assistance program works well for regional events, but was not designed for national events. In the case of an industry-wide NRE, the industry’s mutual assistance program will be scaled to a national level so industry restoration resources are allocated in a singular and seamless fashion. For regional or local outages, mutual assistance resources will continue to be managed through the existing RMAG process, which concentrates on providing support across smaller geographic areas.

Will the NRE Process Increase the Restoration Workforce?

The NRE process coordinates the allocation of restoration workers on a national scale, but it does not create a larger overall pool of qualified restoration workers. The industry is working on workforce development through the Center for Energy Workforce Development (http://www.cewd.org) and with programs like Troops to Energy Jobs (www.troopstoenergyjobs.com), but these efforts are designed to bring new workers into the industry over time.

Does the NRE Process Address Infrastructure Issues?

The NRE process is not designed to directly address infrastructure needs. There is no one solution to hardening the infrastructure or making the system more resilient to storms and other events. These decisions are made by utilities and regulatory bodies that determine the most cost-effective measures to strengthen the grid and make it more resilient.

Will the NRE Process Reduce Damage from Major Outages?

Due to the inherently unpredictable nature of disasters, the NRE process cannot reduce the damage that may occur from severe outage events. The NRE process does scale up the industry’s mutual assistance program to address national level outages and ensures that mutual assistance is safe, efficient, transparent, and equitable.

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