

27-BES

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Subject: AZ Fire Impact on the Local Grid Near Palo Verde

[Westwing is physically distant from Palo Verde, but is the next substation northeast]

Utilities ask for cuts in power use

4 Valley transformers burning

Emily Bittner
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Release

To avoid blackouts, residents should cut back on electricity use through the end of the week, power authorities said Monday after a fire at the Westwing substation eliminated 20 percent of the Valley's supply.

No customers had lost power as of Monday afternoon, said Damon Gross, a spokesman for Arizona Public Service Co., which operates the substation's transformers.

But today, when Valley residents return from the long holiday weekend, businesses reopen and temperatures climb a little higher, supplies are bound to be taxed.

"Clearly, more air-conditioners are going to be running," said Kris Mayes, a member of the Arizona Corporation Commission. "If we take some of that pressure off, we will avert a more serious situation."

The fire at four transformers in the West Valley substation had not diminished Monday evening, 24 hours after it began, fire officials said. APS and Salt River Project have enough energy to supply the Valley but need to find ways to route it to homes and businesses, Gross said.

"We feel like we're in a good position," he said.

APS is planning to increase output at two power stations that are not operating at full capacity, he added.

Like APS, SRP is asking customers to conserve power, and Gov. Janet Napolitano is requesting that state employees watch their electricity use.

"We're going to do what every citizen should do, and that's being very cautious with electricity," said Jeanine L'Ecuyer, a spokeswoman for the governor.

The voluntary cutbacks are a pre-emptive move to avoid power outages, Gross said. Westwing is one of four major substations that conduct power for the Valley, he said. Repairs to the damaged transformers could take weeks.

Gross suggested people turn up their thermostat to 82 degrees and avoid using major appliances during the day, especially during peak power usage between 4 and 6 p.m.

"If you're home today, try to just be conscious of not having all the lights on and all the fans on," said Kore Redden, a spokeswoman for Rural/Metro Fire Department.

No cause for the fire, which started around 7 p.m. Sunday, has been determined. No one has been injured.

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The station, near Loop 303 and Happy Valley Road, has 13 transformers that convert power from 500,000 volts to 230,000 volts. The power is eventually reduced to a voltage level that can be used in homes.

Four transformers are burning and a fifth is in danger of igniting, authorities said. The structures are cooled with a mineral oil. About 100,000 gallons of that oil is fueling the fires and was spreading black smoke from the northwest part of the Valley, they said. Redden said the smoke dissipated later in the day.

A health advisory has been issued for nearby residents.

Authorities from the federal Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives and the Department of Homeland Security visited the scene Sunday night as a precaution to check for criminal activity, Redden said.

"They came and left," she said.

Through the night Sunday and until Monday morning, firefighters used a water curtain to protect a fifth transformer tower from the heat generated by its neighbors. Every two hours, about half a dozen fire engines pumped 200 gallons of water per minute to cool the metal transformer, Redden said.

The structure could ignite at around 200 degrees, she said. Firefighters were using thermal-imaging cameras to track the transformer's temperature.

According to published reports, the Westwing substation played a role in the shutdown last month of the Palo Verde nuclear power plant. An insulator failure sent a power line into a transmission tower, short-circuiting the equipment, according to a Dow Jones story June 15. Protective equipment at Westwing failed, along with two switchyards, eventually shutting down the plant.

Gross cautioned Monday against drawing parallels between the June failure and Sunday's fire.

"We just do not know what the cause is," he said.

The Corporation Commission and governor are closely watching the power situation and are in constant contact with APS and SRP, Mayes said.

Still, the Westwing fire calls for more scrutiny by the commission and an examination of whether the state has enough transformers in such circumstances, she said.

"On the one hand, you don't want to overreact and duplicate where this may have been a fluke," Mayes said. "On the other hand, it happened."

At first, nine fire departments responded to the blaze. Only Rural/Metro firefighters remained Monday, monitoring the fires and hoping they would burn themselves out. No one has any estimate of when that might happen, Redden said.

"We're not going to be surprised if it burns for the next 12 to 24 hours," she said Monday afternoon. "It's going to last for a while."

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