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NJBPU Issues Recommendations on Utilities' Responses to Tropical Storm Isaias Power Outages

Trenton, N.J.—The New Jersey Board of Public Utilities (NJBPU) today issued [a comprehensive report](#) about New Jersey's electric utilities' response to power outages in the aftermath of Tropical Storm Isaias, which struck the state on August 4 and disrupted utility service for more than 1.3 million utility customers, causing extended restoration times for many. NJBPU's "Review and Assessment of Utility Performance" report [outlines recommendations](#) for improvement in areas such as:

- Electric Distribution Company (EDC) communication and outreach with customers and public officials;
- Enhanced vegetation management in targeted areas;
- Tracking and valuing infrastructure hardening and resilience projects; and
- Reports and other metrics.

"Following every major weather event, there are always lessons we can learn and ways to further refine the preparations and response protocols for the next storm," said NJBPU President Joseph L. Fiordaliso. "This year, COVID-19 added an extra layer to the utilities' response plans, forcing them to navigate an additional challenge as they repaired the damage from one of the most destructive storms our state has ever seen. We are seeing more frequent and more powerful storms resulting from climate change, and our top priority is to ensure ratepayers receive safe, reliable utility service. In reviewing the recovery from this particularly damaging weather incident, we identified specific, actionable recommendations for the utilities to make our grid even stronger."

Tropical Storm Isaias brought intense winds and thousands of tree impacts that damaged the State's overhead infrastructure. The report released today contains a close analysis of the actions of each regulated EDC in New Jersey before, during, and after Tropical Storm Isaias. The goals of

this review were to evaluate the efficiency and effectiveness of utility restorations, to minimize the impacts of future storms, and to establish communications methods that provide more fluid communications between customers, elected officials, and the utilities. NJBPU's review found that with the exception of Rockland Electric Company (RECO), whose daily restoration progress and outage reduction was "out of sync" with the State's other EDCs, the overall rate of utility service restoration after Tropical Storm Isaias was reasonable given the extent of the damage. The report includes recommendations for the utilities to improve both communications and restoration times. These recommendations include but are not limited to:

- Updating the EDCs' Outage Management Systems in order to improve handling of peak Call Center volume during major outage events, increase the accuracy of Estimated Time to Repairs, and provide more reliable information to customers and public officials;
- Exploring solutions to expand the EDCs' ability to perform tree trimming and other vegetation management;
- Directing the utilities to routinely evaluate the resiliency impact of storm hardening projects;
- Requiring JCP&L to establish a process of communicating with elected officials and providing situational awareness about real-time restoration activity in their community; and
- Requiring RECO to achieve an average daily restoration rate in New Jersey that is approximately equal to the average daily restoration rate for the New York territory during major events.

The report also addressed "undergrounding," which is the process of burying power lines. Undergrounding is typically cost-prohibitive as a grid-wide solution, given that the approach costs five to 10 times more¹ than overhead power lines. However, in the report NJBPU asked each utility to submit to the agency a cost-benefit analysis for five of their worst-performing circuits (or five circuits that use another metric) as candidates for undergrounding.

The report recognized that the utilities have made significant improvements in storm preparedness and response since Hurricane Irene, Superstorm Sandy, and three nor'easters in 2018. In each of those cases, the Board adopted dozens of improvement protocols. The Board has also approved various utility plans for infrastructure improvements in the past few years. As a result, the utilities' storm responses have improved over time, and replacement and hardening efforts will continue to create further resiliency in the electric grid.

The Board's review showed that following the storm the EDCs mobilized more than 13,000 utility workers and support personnel in order to restore power to customers as quickly and safely as possible. Service was restored within 72 hours to more than 70 percent of utility customers affected by the storm. All affected customers were restored within a week, by August 11.

¹ <https://www.eei.org/issuesandpolicy/electricreliability/undergrounding/Documents/UndergroundReport.pdf>

The utilities have also been complying with COVID-19 health and safety protocols for all field operations and when participating in mutual assistance, which involves member utility companies pooling resources across regions, often in response to natural disasters. Today's report recognized that during the Isaias storm response, the utilities faced unique challenges due to the pandemic, including restrictions on on-site person-to-person exchanges that commonly occur during a large-scale disaster. Overall, NJBPU's analysis found that the utilities managed the COVID-19 aspect of the restoration process well.

The full report is available on NJBPU's [Reports webpage](#), or directly by [clicking here](#).

About the New Jersey Board of Public Utilities (NJBPU)

NJBPU is a state agency and mandated to ensure safe, adequate and proper utility services at reasonable rates for New Jersey customers. Critical services regulated by NJBPU include natural gas, electricity, water, wastewater, telecommunications and cable television. The Board has general oversight and responsibility for monitoring utility service, responding to consumer complaints, and investigating utility accidents. To find out more about NJBPU, visit our website at www.nj.gov/bpu.

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