

Blackout report targets poor practices in US

The interim joint US/Canada report on the 14 August black-out in North America says the event was "entirely preventable."

The report by the US Department of Energy and the Canadian Department of Natural Resources - prepared under the co-chairmanship of US Energy Secretary Spencer Abraham and Canadian Energy Minister Herb Dhaliwal - targets the Akron-based utility First Energy and the Mid-west Independent System Operator in particular.

Its says that the electricity industry's supervisory control and data acquisition system (SCADA) has been demonstrated to have flaws and identifies it as a "pressing security challenge."

The reports adds that MISO failed on 14 August to communicate effectively with neighbouring control systems, leading to the mid-west problem spreading east to New York and north in to Ontario, with an estimated \$US6 billion in economic losses. The ISO used "outdated procedures," it says.

The report cites First Energy's failure to adequately trim trees along its transmission system as "common cause" for the crisis, charging that, overall, the utility "failed to ensure the security of (its) system."

It also asserts that, when the problems began, First Energy's control room staff were operating with faulty computer software and were unaware that their line-monitoring software was not functioning.

The task force has found no evidence of "computer viruses or any sort of illicit cyber activities." It concludes there is no evidence available of deliberate damage to the transmission system or of tampering with relevant equipment.

Public hearings on the investigation will start in Cleveland, Ohio, this week before moving to New York City and Toronto. It is expected to eventually provide a final report including recommendations on whether those deemed to be at fault can be penalised.

First Energy has responded to the report by saying it remains convinced that the events of 14 August cannot be sheeted home to the failures of any one system.

Spencer Abraham says the blackout was "largely preventable." He adds: "A number of relatively small problems combined to become a very big one."

[Source: ESAA]