

Dunderdale insists province isn't in crisis

Says rolling blackouts are proof of need for Muskrat Falls

Scale back

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With the province entering the fourth day of rolling blackouts, tens of thousands of Newfoundlanders without power, and the prospect of a strained electrical grid for weeks to come, Premier Kathy Dunderdale assured the people Sunday afternoon that there's no crisis, and things are under control.

What's more, Dunderdale warned that due to aging infrastructure and higher demand for electricity, these sorts of outages could become more common between now and 2017, when the Muskrat Falls hydroelectric dam is built.

"There's a critical period that we need to get through until we have a new source of power, new infrastructure, and more than anything else we have redundancy," she told reporters Sunday afternoon. "After 2017 hopefully we'll never find ourselves in this kind of circumstance again because of the redundancy that will be built into the system."

Dunderdale tied the current outages directly to the Muskrat Falls project, saying that the failure at Holyrood proves that the aging power plant has outlived its usefulness and needs to be replaced by Muskrat Falls.

"We've talked incessantly, it seems to me, over the last number of years about the aging facility in Holyrood and the fact that that facility needed to be replaced," she said.

Despite insisting that there was no crisis, Dunderdale – flanked by electrical utility brass and ministers – begged the people of the province to do everything in their power to conserve electricity, or risk further blackouts.

"Everybody has a role to play in this," Dunderdale said. "You know, if you're not using a room in a house, turn off the heat, turn off the lights. You know, you might want to do your dishes by hand over the next few days." Problems with the Holyrood power plant, along with two smaller gas power plants in St. John's and Stephenville, forced Nalcor to scale back electrical generation and triggered rolling blackouts. Then, when there was a fire in the Sunnyside transformer station, the situation got much, much worse.

The failure placed 190,000 customers in the dark, and left most of the province without power Saturday morning.

One customer is one home or business, so the actual number of people affected by the outages was much higher. Most of those people had at least some electricity back by Sunday afternoon.

Earl Ludlow, CEO of Newfoundland Power, pleaded with people to use the minimum amount of electricity possible in the next few days.

“Conserve, conserve, conserve. And that means, turn the heat back,” he said. “Close the door and turn off the heat in a room. Defer washing dishes.”

Essentially all of the problems come back to a lack of generating capacity by Nalcor subsidiary NL Hydro. Ed Martin, CEO of Nalcor, said that the crown corporation was hit by a raft of problems it couldn't predict.

He said it's never possible to guarantee 100 per cent reliability, and that taking the long view, he's still satisfied that people see very few interruptions in electrical service.

“I see ourselves operating at this point still within a range that is perfectly acceptable over time,” he said. “From a system reliability point of view, we'll probably talk more about that later. Right now our focus is on people of the province – getting the power back on as quickly and efficiently as possible.”

Like Dunderdale, he said that Holyrood just isn't solid anymore, and it needs to be replaced.

“Honestly, I can't promise the same reliability coming out of a Holyrood that we may have done and had 15 years or 10 years or even 5 years ago,” he said.

Speaking to reporters Sunday, Martin said he won't likely know until some time today when Holyrood will be running anywhere close to full capacity, or when other gas turbines will be back to full function.

Both opposition parties called for an independent investigation into it all. Liberal Leader Dwight Ball said he believes there are infrastructure upgrades that could have been done to avert this disaster.

“Was this something that we saw coming, or is this something that was created by this so-called culmination of events?” he asked.

New Democrat Leader Lorraine Michael called for a full-blown public inquiry conducted by the Public Utilities Board. She said she was astounded that Dunderdale doesn't see the current situation as a crisis.

“We have a crisis when we cannot meet peak moments during the year. And whether that peak moment is December or February, we know that peak moment is going to be there, and we should be planning for it,” she said. “One of the things that I'm demanding of the premier right now is that the minute this crisis is over, that she puts this in the hands of the PUB for a public inquiry so people can really get answers for the questions.”