New Jersey’s power and fuel infrastructure was no match for Sandy

Chris Warner, Executive Editor

The love-hate relationship we have with "the grid" was inescapable during Superstorm Sandy. We don’t think about it much when our homes are lit and appliances are humming – we have the freedom to do anything we want. But when there’s an interruption, there’s that nagging wish to be free from the grip of our local utility, which took as much as 10 days to two weeks to restore power to many New Jersey residents. Sandy proved, however, that being off the grid doesn’t mean you’re really free from the grid.

Many first-time solar panel owners find that out very quickly when there’s an outage. The inverter in the panel owner’s home shuts off to ensure power stays out of wires to ensure the safety of nearby utility workers. So, the energy they get out of those panels is merely sold back to the utility, and they still have to remain on "the grid" in order to draw power into their homes, outage or no outage.

During the run up to the storm, many New Jerseyans turned to back-up generators. News programs showed empty hardware store shelves, not to be restocked with generators until after the storm passed. Portable generators have a number of downsides such as the risk of carbon monoxide poisoning and the sticker shock (medium sized portable generators can run close to $1000); theft of these pricey devices is also common. That’s a lot to trade for a few days’ comfort. In addition, people who weathered the storm’s aftermath with gas generators had to stand in 1970s-like lines at the service station, contending with unhappy motorists who were queued up to get their own fuel.

And why the long lines at the service station?

If that station was in a town or neighborhood without power, there was nothing it could do to dispense the gas – there is not a requirement for gas retailers to have backup generators. And the refineries closest to densely populated northern New Jersey were without power, too. Critically, the Colonial pipeline, which runs from the Gulf of Mexico to Linden, in northern New Jersey, had a power failure (http://bit.ly/QaxCt2) Governor Christie relaxed rules that prevented retailers from taking out-of-state fuel shipments, but many stations were still without power for

well over a week after the storm.

Despite increasing reliance on backup power and alternative energy sources, New Jersey’s experience shows we have much to learn about a widespread loss of power. In the days after the storm, many residents were unable to drive to work without waiting in hours-long gas lines, and the delivery of goods was a challenge. States prone to coastal or tropical storms should revisit back-up generator requirements for services stations (in a way that doesn’t put them out of business), and stations should be allowed alternatives (without waiting for a governor’s decision) for fuel deliveries should a refinery go offline. I’m sure there are good reasons for the rules we currently have, but when it comes to energy we must establish more redundancies because we’re all connected – with or without the grid.

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