

# When storm season and COVID-19 collide, the economic impacts could be dire

BY MIKE EDMONDS | 7.7.2020

As the Southeast prepares for a storm season predicted to more active than usual, questions surrounding how utilities will safely navigate storm recovery during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic are significant points of concern. The tried-and-true storm-recovery playbooks utilities have spent years developing are being adjusted to improve safety in direct line-crew interactions. Thankfully, utilities are used to challenging situations and have been hard at work devising plans that put the safety and well-being of their crews and customers top of mind.

The utility industry often works in large numbers, with thousands of lineworkers from around the country coming together to restore power as quickly as possible following a severe storm. One of the primary adjustments utilities are making to promote social distancing on the job is the use of smaller line-crew teams, often limiting one crew member per vehicle. Additional social-distancing tactics are being established to house, feed, and monitor the health status of crews called upon to support the grid and local communities once storms hit.

The changes the utility industry continues to put in place will provide a workplace environment with less risk of contracting the coronavirus as line crews support the grid. Safety is the number one priority in the utility industry, but these new protocols could open the possibility that storm recovery may take longer because of the COVID-19 adjustments put in place.

Many businesses across the country implementing COVID-19 response strategies have seen similar significant impacts and shifts in their operations, including more employees working from home. These business changes have had a direct impact on not only how, but where, power is consumed, changing the energy-consumption characteristic.

Over the last few months, the industry initially saw a drop in total power consumption resulting from these work-from-home practices, but many businesses are beginning to see a gradual return to traditional workplaces. However, the majority of employees are generally still working from home, resulting in untraditionally high power consumption at the edges of the grid during the day.

This shift in work environments has led to an increased demand for a reliable and resilient power-delivery system at the edges of the grid.

Working from home is expected to remain a significant part of our "new normal," presenting a need for advanced, reliable solutions and resilient storm-recovery plans to support end-users moving forward. Outages, and their resulting impacts, from this year's severe storms will matter to end-customers and businesses more than ever.

In an average storm year, recovery plans often prioritize restoring power to critical infrastructure over residential areas. As a safeguard, many office buildings are equipped with back-up generation to help maintain operations throughout the storm-recovery process. This year, office buildings stand empty, and home power supplies are playing their most critical role in history. The storm season could bring with it one of the largest financial impacts to businesses within all industries. Never before has the business world needed to rely on most of its employees using home offices and personal utility services to conduct business.

In previous storm years, back-up generation and prioritization in recovery plans provided employees the opportunity to return to work, operating in a "business as usual" approach before power was fully restored to the rest of the community. If businesses continue to instruct employees to work from home through this storm season, power restoration will take longer than usual because of new COVID-19 protocols.

Because recovery plans do not prioritize residential areas, businesses must establish contingency plans to navigate and accommodate employees potentially being unable to work from home for days until power is restored. Outages following severe storms always have an associated cost, but with businesses spread throughout neighborhoods instead of consolidated in business centers, storm-prone states' economies, many of which rely on billions of dollars from businesses for their GDP, are likely to see an increased negative impact this storm season.

Indeed, the 2020 storm season will be a difficult one in more ways than one. But the challenges the industry faces this year can help set the stage for future improvements to the grid.

Over the years, utilities have been investigating more resilient storm-recovery solutions. When properly implemented, deployment of these solutions has resulted in faster storm recovery,



Destruction as a result of Hurricane Irma

benefiting the local economy. Our digitally driven world demands a constant supply of power, regardless of whether there's a storm or COVID-19 precautions are keeping people home.

Previously ignored momentary outages during the day are now active pain points, and most business professionals have stories about the Internet or power cutting out, causing disruptions in their job performance. Regardless of the situation, end-users no longer tolerate outages of any length. The culmination of an anticipated severe storm season and the impact on customers from the COVID-19 crisis have motivated utilities globally to look into solutions that boost reliability and resiliency to improve their grid their grid's performance moving forward.

Increased use of advanced, automated technology benefits utilities and end-users alike. Regardless of blue-sky days or black-sky days, automated technology results in faster recovery time, improved reliability, and better resiliencies. Simply using new technology to eliminate repeat field trips to replace fuses tripped by temporary faults takes on a whole new meaning now.

Many of the impacts and adjustments the world made this year to navigate the COVID-19 crisis will likely remain a part of our "new normal" for years to come. The utility industry can't let this opportunity for grid improvements to pass. Long-term utility operation plans must factor the increased use of advanced, resilient equipment. The price of an outage during COVID-19 is too high to not consider advanced solutions that can reset themselves, getting the business world back online faster without sending crews out unnecessarily in a post COVID-19 world.