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Thursday, September 4, 2003

THE BATTALION

Utility confusion uncovered  
in blackout investigation

By H. Josef Herbert  
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

WASHINGTON — During the hour before the nation's worst blackout, engineers in the control center of an Ohio utility struggled to figure out why transmission lines were failing and complained that a computer breakdown was making it difficult, transcripts of telephone communications released Wednesday show.

At one point, an engineer at the Midwest grid managing organization asked engineers at the Ohio utility, FirstEnergy Corp., to explain why they had not responded to a line outage reported sometime earlier and asked that they find out what was going on.

"We have no clue. Our computer is giving us fits, too," replied a FirstEnergy technician identified as Jerry Snickey. "We don't even know the status of some of the stuff (power fluctuations) around us."

A short time later, a technician at the Midwest Independent Transmission System Operators, the group that monitors the Midwest power grid, expressed frustration with FirstEnergy's failure to diagnose the problems erupting in their power system.

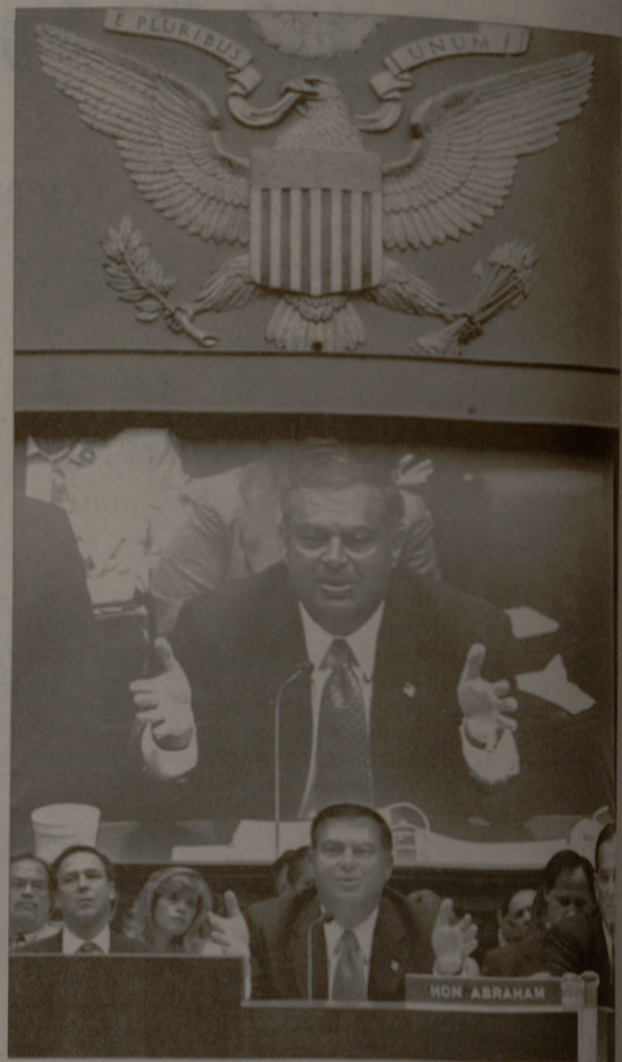
"I called you guys like 10 minutes ago, and I thought you were figuring out what was going on there," the MISO technician, identified as Don Hunter, complained, according to the transcripts.

"Well, we're trying to," replied Snickey. "Our computer is not happy. It's not cooperating either."

The exchanges were contained in 650 pages of transcripts of telephone communications provided by MISO to House Energy and Commerce Committee investigators and made public by the committee Wednesday at the conclusion of the first day of hearings into the blackout.

Executives of FirstEnergy as well as other Midwest utilities and Midwest transmission grid managers were scheduled to testify before the committee on Thursday.

Although investigators have said previously that power line failures in Ohio were the first



As Deputy Secretary of Energy Kyle McSlarrow, right, looks on, Secretary of Energy Spencer Abraham addresses the House Committee on Energy and Commerce during a hearing Wednesday on the Northeast blackout.

indication of an electricity grid problem on the afternoon of the blackout, the transcripts for the first time revealed the confusion in the FirstEnergy control center in Ohio as the utility's engineers sought to get a handle on what was becoming a growing and mysterious power problem.

According to previous timelines made public, the first sign of a problem developed when FirstEnergy's power plant in Eastlake, Ohio, tripped off around 2 p.m. EDT on Aug. 14; next, at 3:06 p.m., one of its transmission lines failed and at 3:32 p.m. another high-voltage line, known as Hanna-Juniper, went dark.

That caught the attention of the MISO engineers monitoring the grid from their control center.

"I was wondering what was going on there," Hunter said, the FirstEnergy control center shortly after 3:43 p.m. EDT. FirstEnergy engineers were unsure, but Hunter knew something was amiss.

"I've got to get my calculator," he said.

"We've got something going on," a FirstEnergy technician identified only as Schwartz, replied. "I'm going to have to take a look and see what's happening."

FirstEnergy grid problems have been at the center of an investigation into what may have triggered the blackout. Investigations have said they are fairly certain the first significant power system problems occurred with the transmission lines in FirstEnergy's service area in northern Ohio.

NEWS IN BRIEF

Ridge: Mexican consular IDs have security problems

WASHINGTON (AP) — Businesses and cities that accept identification cards issued by Mexico to its citizens in the United States do so at their own risk because the documents are not fraud-proof, Homeland Security Secretary Tom Ridge said Wednesday.

The Mexican IDs are under review by a White House-led panel to determine if they pose a security risk and whether the cards should be accepted as proper identification.

Known as the "matricula consular," the card issued by Mexico's consulates in the United States and shows the date of birth, a current photograph and the address of the cardholder. Many of the cards have been issued to Mexicans living in the United States, including illegal immigrants.

Dozens of financial institutions accept the cards for photo identification when their holders open bank accounts. Cardholders also have been able to use them to turn on utilities, check out library books, get drivers licenses or other basic services in some communities and states.

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By Sara THE E

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