Press Release

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Fort Drum Public Affairs

Fort Drum goes dark to test energy resiliency

FORT DRUM, N.Y. (May 9, 2023) – Fort Drum experienced a major blackout this morning when, at approximately 4 a.m., all commercial power was temporarily shut off.

The total darkness was intended to shed light on Fort Drum’s energy resilience readiness.

Rich Hughes, Fort Drum emergency manager, said that shutting down commercial power for several hours enabled the testing of backup power systems and could potentially identify gaps in utility supplies and mission readiness.

“This really allows us to identify areas where we can be more resilient in the future where power is concerned,” he said. “Whether that means generators or redundant power sources, and finding out what needs to be fixed so that we are more prepared if this were to happen for real.”

Housing areas, Army and Air Force Exchange Service facilities, and some essential services were disconnected for a short duration before power was restored. Other areas were required to stay offline for several hours to determine the effectiveness of generation assets.

The post-wide outage is part of a Department of Defense exercise called Black Start, which is congressionally mandated by the 2022 National Defense Authorization Act. Fort Drum is the third Army installation to conduct a Black Start so far this year.

“A Black Start is taking the circuit from zero power and bringing it back online,” said Jonathan Parobeck, Fort Drum Public Works Utilities Branch chief. “We’ve gone through multiple plans and brought all the subject-matter experts to the table to determine how we could meet the intent of this exercise.”

Restoring power

While the PW team is well-versed in restoring power, there were variables to consider.

“Because we left circuits off for several hours and some of our underground stuff is submerged in water, that could seep in through the insulated wires and cause a circuit to trip,” Parobeck said. “So that is something we look for when bringing power back on.”

Parobeck said that most of the utility technicians were able to treat the outages like a normal workday.

“We have areas and buildings with people assigned to them,” he said. “It’s a complete installation-wide check – building to building – making sure the heating systems and lights are back on. They’ve all been in that footprint before, and it’s a good team. They know what needs to be done.”

Cody Thomas began working in the Utilities Branch last December.

“I work on anything high voltage, street lights, and a lot of switch and substation checks,” he said. “Pretty much anything with power.”

Thomas said that in the short time he’s been employed at Fort Drum he has become familiar enough with the installation layout to be efficient in his job.

“If not, we have all the maps we need and that helps out a lot,” he said.

And there is no unfamiliar territory for the Utilities Branch crew when it comes to power outages.

“Every inch of this post has had a power outage at one time or another,” said Pete Yodice, Fort Drum Public Works executive officer. “We’re used to it, but it can look eerie when you are driving around and see all the buildings without power. In the barracks, you can just see the little glow here and there of the emergency lights.”

Community members were notified the day before via multiple communication platforms such as the Alert! system and social media. Soldiers and civilian employees received a delayed reporting status, or work-from-home notification, similar to what happens during a severe weather event.

“We didn’t want there to be any panic, or people being surprised by power outages,” Hughes said. “We especially wanted to let them know that most essential service would still be available, and that they should drive carefully because the outages will affect traffic lights.”

In the weeks leading up to the exercise, community members were provided with public safety announcements with tips about power outages and how to prepare for emergencies. It was also a topic discussed during the last two monthly Community Information Exchange forums.

“We used every platform we have to inform the community about emergency preparedness, while communicating what we could about this particular power outage event,” said Col. James Zacchino Jr., Fort Drum garrison commander. “To make this a realistic scenario to test installation capabilities, we couldn’t say everything that was going to happen. But in a real-world situation, we wouldn’t necessarily have all the answers right away either.”

It’s hard not to think back to the 1998 winter ice storm whenever the topic of emergency preparedness is discussed. The weather event caused massive damage to utilities in this area, and residents went days without power. Fort Drum was more fortunate than most, and the 10th Mountain Division (LI) suspended training so that Soldiers could support local communities with military generators and supplies, and they assisted with the removing fallen trees.

“Anyone who lives in the North Country should be prepared for some sort of a power outage,” Parobeck said. “I was still in school at the time of ’98 storm, and it was bad. There were tree limbs all over, flooded basements and pipes bursting. My grandfather worked for National Grid, and he was always ready for outage, so we were OK. But in certain areas, it lasted for weeks.”

As difficult as repairs to underground power systems are to make, Parobeck said the main advantage is that it is largely protected during ice storms.

“One of the benefits of this exercise is that it allowed us the time to do some pre-testing on the generation,” he said. “Shutting the power off a building and letting it run four or five hours – we’ve done a lot of that in the past few months. It’s something that we’ve always tried to do in the past, but we’ve been able to do more of that now.”

It also allowed the Utilities Branch to make some upgrades.

“An exercise like this gets the installation thinking about utilities, and it gets the leadership thinking about it,” Parobeck said. “Now it’s a focus, and people have eyes on it, and it leads to this getting fixed or that project getting approved.”

Zacchino commended the teamwork across multiple directorates and agencies to successfully plan and conduct a large-scale exercise.

“This exercise was a team effort across the installation and outside organizations with the end state to collectively validate vulnerabilities and gaps, but also to validate the good things we are doing,” he said.

Even with power restored and operations back to normal, Zacchino said the exercise is not quite finished.

“We have a plan to sit down and review all the collective data from what happened today,” he said. “The lessons learned across the spectrum of different functions will require some time to put together and then a lot of discussions from every perspective. What happens afterward will be the most powerful piece of this exercise.”

For further information regarding this release, contact Public Affairs at katherine.e.wright12.civ@army.mil or 315-772-9043

Video of the installation before and during the Black Start exercise can be accessed at the following links:

Fort Drum\_AM Clip – Driving Fort Drum streets during early morning hours prior to start of BSE, normal street views

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Sequence 01 – Aerial overview of Fort Drum (Cantonment Area)

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Sequence 02 – Lights coming back on from aerial overview of Fort Drum (Cantonment Area)

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PW Utilities – Fort Drum Public Works staff members working at electrical junction during Black Start exercise.

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Photo captions:

1: An aerial view of the Fort Drum cantonment before the rolling power outages commenced the morning of May 9. (Photo by Mike Strasser, Fort Drum Garrison Public Affairs)

2,4: Military police personnel direct traffic at intersections until power to the traffic lights could be restored. This was the result of a planned power outage May 9 during a post-wide energy resilience exercise. (Photo by Mike Strasser, Fort Drum Garrison Public Affairs)

3,5,6: Directorate of Public Works’ Utilities Branch personnel work to bring power back to street lights, traffic signals, homes, and buildings May 9 during a post-wide energy resilience exercise. (Photo by Mike Strasser, Fort Drum Garrison Public Affairs)

7: Representatives from Fort Drum directorates, agencies and units gather inside the emergency operations center, which serves as the hub of communications and coordinative efforts May 9 during the post-wide energy resilience exercise, Photo by Mike Strasser, Fort Drum Garrison Public Affairs)