

Case Study: Auckland, New Zealand - February 1988

During February of 1988, Auckland, New Zealand (city 1996 pop. 345,768; urban agglomeration pop. 991,796), suffered a total power loss when breaks in the underground power lines occurred. The breaks occurred due to high load on the circuits. The power outage lasted for over 30-days and caused great distress to the city. Courts were sitting in motel rooms, the Port was inactive, and Council services were sustained. Schools and universities postponed all service for the duration, putting back their timetables. Hotels were hit hard (many of the big international hotels in Auckland were without mains power, although some have generators.) Students were locked out of halls of residence, and those with nowhere else to go were camping in the suburbs.

The political fallout began, with the chairman of the board, which ran Mercury (the electric utility) resigning. A government enquiry was announced. Nevertheless, the Mercury line was consistent: this is an incredibly unfortunate coincidence of failures, they were not negligent, this is an Act of God, and they are not liable for compensation. Lawyers were advising their clients the same - they have little chance of winning a case for compensation.

No official State of Emergency was announced, however the emergency management staff was very active. Public Health authorities forced food suppliers to close down and dump refrigerated food instead of continuing to trade with fingers crossed. Parking wardens have been told to back off - they spent the weekend ticketing cars and vans being loaded with files outside office buildings!

There was great concern about the dangers associated with temporary power supplies. The fire brigade was "run ragged" answering false alarms from confused alarm systems and hosing down overheating diesel generators, which were not designed to run continuously in unventilated basements. One building was evacuated by firefighters wearing breathing equipment when generator exhaust was piped throughout the building by the ventilation system! Every available generator was thundering away in basements and on pavements throughout the city. Unfortunately, some of them haven't been used for years and weren't reliable.

There was also concern about water supplies failing in high-rise buildings as their header tanks empty and the pumps have no power. Some apartment-dwellers were making do with candles but were forced to leave when water ran out and they couldn't flush any more. The Tourism Board was getting calls from overseas operators who thought the whole country was closed down.

When the repairs were finally completed (some 30-days later) the circuits had to be brought up to capacity carefully. The electric utility company along with local government officials, radio stations, and television stations sought and received the assistance and cooperation of residents, business leaders, industry, and government. They posted a stoplight on the local television viewers screen and when the power was initiated the users were asked to cut back on services to ensure the stop light stayed in the yellow-green position. The TV stations pitched in and assisted the utility in energy conservation measures.



Bottom Line:

This method could be easily adopted in the U.S. grid as a conservation measure for use during a peak energy crisis.

For More Information on how to implement this action please contact:

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