

NEWS RELEASE

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STATEMENT OF IBEW PRESIDENT EDWIN D. HILL ON THE ONE-YEAR ANNIVERSARY OF THE NORTHEAST BLACKOUT

A year after the biggest blackout in North American history, the United States is no closer to making the changes urgently needed to improve the reliability of the electric grid.

We've had endless talk, finger pointing, and even an international investigation – but not the will to act. One year later, the regulatory and oversight changes broadly acknowledged as necessary have not been made. We have no assurance we can avoid another massive grid malfunction like the one that brought down the system on August 14, 2003.

Last year's blackout was a symptom of the larger problem created by deregulation and increased dependence of electricity: an aging and deteriorating network suffering from years of overuse and underinvestment. Deregulation has increased our interdependence but has not brought the capacity upgrades needed. As a result, the system has weakened.

A healthy, integrated system does not shut down more than 100 power plants in eight states and Canada within minutes.

Providing federal energy regulators the authority to enforce mandatory standards would be a good start. The IBEW, consumer groups, and utilities are in agreement with this key recommendation of the U.S.-Canadian task force. But the legislation is still being held hostage in Congress.

Clear and unequivocal lines of authority and responsibility are needed to protect energy users in today's hodgepodge of industrial and regulatory oversight. We agree with those in Congress who want mandatory electric reliability rules adopted separately from the stalled energy bill. The Electric Reliability Improvement Act of 2003 (introduced in the House of Representatives as H.R. 3004) would increase accountability and give federal regulators real authority to oversee the system. This legislation is no panacea, but it is a vital first step. We also must improve maintenance, increase employee training and upgrade transmission capacity.

Without mandatory regulations, progress will be intermittent, arbitrary and inadequate. If we don't learn from the mistakes of the 2003 blackout, we will surely repeat them.

The IBEW represents approximately 750,000 workers in the United States and Canada, including 220,000 in the utility industry.

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