Industry-Government Teamwork to Protect the Grid Pays Off

By THOMAS A. FANNING

Contrary to sensationalized media depictions of a nation on the verge of going dark, the electric sector does a great job of planning and taking action to protect the grid from physical and cyber attacks. Our success so far—I say “so far” because the effort requires us to constantly adapt and evolve along with the threats—is due to many factors. One that deserves to be acknowledged is our partnership with government. Our coordination with government is exceedingly important to ensuring the security of the electric system that is so essential to the life, health, and safety of all Americans.

To see the value of this partnership, one need look no further than to the recently reported cyber incident in Ukraine or the blizzard that impacted more than 60 million Americans along the East Coast in January. The industry, through the Electricity Subsector Coordinating Council (ESCC) and the Electricity Information Sharing and Analysis Center (E-ISAC), worked with the government to share information, improve situational awareness, and facilitate unity of effort and message during this historic storm.

Underlying the ESCC-government partnership is a mutual understanding that the protection of critical infrastructure is a shared responsibility. It allows both parties to better understand how each plans for and responds to incidents and improves how both communicate with the American people. This notion of common purpose is gaining widespread acceptance. The National Infrastructure Advisory Council, for example, recognized the electric power sector as a model for how critical infrastructure sectors can partner effectively with the government. In addition, administration officials from the Department of Energy (DOE) and Department of Homeland Security praised our coordination efforts.

The effectiveness of our public-private collaboration also is having an impact on national policy. From the cybersecurity information sharing and liability protections law, to DOE emergency authority, to engaging the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission on supply chain issues and DOE on the Quadrennial Energy Review, the experience and perspective of industry have helped advance measures that ultimately benefit the customers and communities we serve.

Considering the potential for harm and the ever-changing nature of the threats, we must play both offense and defense. We continue to undertake a full range of enhanced security and resiliency initiatives, including strengthening our spare equipment programs and mutual assistance networks; developing a cyber mutual assistance program; conducting sector-wide exercises, such as the North American Electric Reliability Corporation’s GridEx; coordinating with other critical infrastructure sectors; and enhancing the E-ISAC and machine-to-machine threat information-sharing capabilities. Cooperation and coordination are essential to make these efforts meaningful and effective.

We must be in this for the long haul—and we are. That’s why the electric power sector is committed to strengthening its government partnerships, coordinating with other critical infrastructure sectors, engaging and educating the public, and making the necessary investments to make the grid stronger, more reliable, and more resilient—in the face of any threat. The American people are counting on us to get it right.

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The Electricity Subsector Coordinating Council (ESCC) serves as the principal liaison between the federal government and the electric power sector, with the mission of coordinating efforts to prepare for, and respond to, national-level disasters or threats to critical infrastructure. The ESCC includes utility CEOs and trade association leaders representing all segments of the industry.