

Old plastic haunts ComEd operations

Utility uses material
others replaced long
ago, official concedes

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An old and faulty plastic that most power companies abandoned decades ago is still laced throughout Commonwealth Edison's power grid, leading to such problems as the recent South Loop blackout, a utility

official said Monday.

In the 1960s, ComEd followed other utilities in an attempt to remove from the grid insulators made of Bakelite. But ComEd then apparently abandoned the program, leaving broad expanses of the region susceptible to power interruptions, the officials said.

Also Monday, ComEd acknowledged that the summerlong streak of uninterrupted power production from its nuclear plants ended when a reactor automatically shut down Saturday because of a valve problem.

That revelation came on a day

when government officials said at a hearing that they have lost confidence in information provided over the years by the utility. And that prompted federal officials to talk about slapping more regulation on all utilities.

Even as these developments unfolded on various fronts, ComEd's summer of discontent continued with small power outages that a year ago would have gone largely unnoticed, but now fuel fears that the electrical infrastructure is failing.

It was engineers from Califor-

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ComEd: A utility official blames some of the company's recent woes on the continued use of an obsolete plastic in cable joints.

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nia who led ComEd engineers to begin looking for Bakelite in cable joints that were failing, according to Senior Vice President David Helwig.

Bakelite, now coveted by collectors of kitschy plastic do-dads, was used to make collars that protect cable splices. In the 1960s, the industry stopped using Bakelite because the material was not staying watertight.

"It does appear there was some knowledge of this during the 1960s at ComEd and some effort was made to replace them, but that was not brought to completion," said Helwig, who earlier in the day spoke at the government hearing.

Those collars apparently failed outside the Jefferson Substation, causing a power outage that darkened the South Loop earlier this month. Some 220 Bakelite joints might now be in as many as 25 of ComEd's 166 buried transmission lines, and it will take weeks of inspections to find them all and determine if they are deteriorating, Helwig said.

That wasn't ComEd's only trouble on Monday.

The company was working to restart one of two reactors at the LaSalle Nuclear Power Station, which "scrammed" on Saturday, ending a 90-day run of continuous operation by all 10 of the utility's nuclear generators.

All summer, ComEd's Nuclear Generation Group has kept itself out of the headlines by operating the plants more reliably than ever before, even as problems with the utility's transmission and distribution system have been creating notorious blackouts.

In the spring, the utility's nuclear boss, Oliver Kingsley, boldly pledged to keep "all 10 units available all summer." According to the fine print of the promise, however, the utility was aiming to have its plants average 90-percent capacity over the summer.

The plant shutdown created no blackouts or power shortages and the facility was expected to be back on line and producing power by Tuesday morning, officials said.

At Monday's hearing, three federal lawmakers from Illinois heard testimony from state and Chicago officials, consumer and business representatives, watchdog groups and industry executives.

As Democratic U.S. Reps. Bobby Rush, Jan Schakowsky and Danny Davis listened, a string of ComEd watchers offered similar appeals for the company to explain its plans for overhauling the utility's troubled infrastructure—and then stick to them.

Charles Fisher, executive director of the Illinois Commerce Commission, said he has been chagrined to discover that the company's own maintenance records contain inaccuracies.

"I'm not saying that they kept two sets of books," Fisher said during a break in the proceedings. "But it's become apparent that the company has said that they will do things and they haven't followed through. It's very clear to me that my recommendation to the commission will be to specifically order individual performance measures and individual improvements."

Beyond that, Fisher said the ICC is considering an appeal to the General Assembly for legislation that would allow it to fine utilities more heavily than current law allows.

Amid suggestions that the industry might benefit from more regulation, utility executives asserted that—despite the recent problems with ComEd—they are capable of running their systems without broad federal intervention. "ComEd has made the commitment to do whatever it takes to complete a ground-zero approach to resolving this problem and will spare no effort to do so," said Helwig, who took charge of ComEd's troubled transmission and distribution system just over a week ago.

The first step in that process, said Chicago Environment Commissioner William Abolt, is for the company to begin to "talk frankly about its system." The company has said that it is prepared to disclose the details of its maintenance record and repair needs.

Monday's hearing was aimed at crafting federal legislation to restructure the electricity industry. Rush said he hoped that such a bill might be out of committee by the end of October and put to a vote by the full Congress by the new year.

Rush said he would likely recommend enacting standards of distribution reliability—measured, in part, by the number of outages in given areas. He also would likely recommend the powers of the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission be expanded to better monitor regional transmission issues.

Meanwhile, ComEd experienced at least two unrelated outages Monday.

The largest affected some 6,900 customers on the South Side for about 20 minutes Monday afternoon when a transformer failed. Earlier Monday, a downed ComEd power line blacked out roughly 1,000 customers for about an hour in the Waukegan Beach and Benton Township areas.