

String of electrical grid attacks in Pacific Northwest is unsolved

Emails obtained by OPB and KUOW show that at least six electric substations in the region have been attacked, at least two by people with firearms

Conrad Wilson and John Ryan

Dec. 8, 2022

The electrical grid has been physically attacked at least six times in Oregon and Western Washington since mid-November, causing growing alarm for law enforcement as well as utilities responsible for parts of the region's critical infrastructure.

According to information obtained by Oregon Public Broadcasting and KUOW Public Radio, at least two of the incidents bear similarities to the attacks on substations in North Carolina on Saturday that left thousands of people without electricity for days.

Portland General Electric, the Bonneville Power Administration, Cowlitz County Public Utility District and Puget Sound Energy have confirmed a total of six separate attacks on electrical substations they manage in Oregon and Washington. Attackers used firearms in at least some of the incidents in both states, and some power customers in Oregon and Washington experienced at least brief service disruption as a result of the attacks.

All four utilities stated they were cooperating with the Federal Bureau of Investigation. The FBI declined to confirm whether it was investigating.

"The FBI routinely shares information with our law enforcement partners in order to assist in protecting the communities they serve," Joy Jiras, a spokeswoman for the FBI in Portland said in a statement Wednesday. "We urge the public to remain vigilant and report any suspicious activity to law enforcement."

After the attacks on substations in Oregon and Washington, the FBI and Oregon's Titan Fusion Center issued a memo on Dec. 2 that warned utilities about the recent attacks. The fusion center gathers intelligence to investigate and prevent acts of terrorism.

The next day, two substations in North Carolina were damaged by gunfire, cutting electricity for days to tens of thousands of people.

Electrical substations are complicated and potentially dangerous parts of the electrical grid that keep the nation's lights on. Substations convert high-voltage electricity that travels across long-distance transmission lines to the lower voltages used by businesses and residences.

The Bonneville Power Administration, a federal agency that markets hydropower throughout the Pacific Northwest and owns 15,000 miles of transmission line and 200 substations, had confirmed at least one incident by Wednesday evening. The agency called it a "deliberate physical attack" that damaged a substation in Clackamas County, Oregon, early on Thanksgiving morning.

Oregon Public Broadcasting and KUOW obtained an email written by a security specialist with the Bonneville Power Administration that details that attack. OPB is withholding the specialist's name at the request of Bonneville Power due to their concerns about the specialist's safety. Two people cut through the fence surrounding a high-voltage substation, then "used firearms to shoot up and disable numerous pieces of equipment and cause significant damage," the security specialist wrote.

The memo also referenced "several attacks on various substations," recently, in Western Washington, "including setting the control houses on fire, forced entry and sabotage



Four electrical substations in the Pacific Northwest were attacked in recent weeks. Substations convert high-voltage electricity that travels across long-distance transmission lines to the lower voltages used by businesses and residences. Pictured: Bonneville Dam power lines.
Bradley W. Parks / OPB

of intricate electrical control systems, causing short circuits by tossing chains across the overhead buswork, and ballistic attack with small caliber firearms.”

(“Buswork” is a term for the maze of wires and switches that hum overhead at a substation.)

The security specialist stated that online extremist groups are calling for the attacks and providing instructions on how to do it.

“There has been a significant uptick in incidents of break-ins related to copper and tool or materials theft, but now we are dealing with quickly escalating incidents of sabotage,” the email reads.

A spokesperson for Puget Sound Energy, the largest utility in Washington, confirmed two incidents in late November at two of its substations. Spokesperson Gerald Tracy declined to provide locations or any other details, citing an ongoing investigation by the FBI.

“We are aware of recent threats on power systems across the country and take these very seriously,” Tracy said in an email.

Cowlitz County Public Utility District spokesperson Alice Dietz said vandals cut fences and damaged electrical equipment at two substations near Woodland, Washington, about 20 miles north of Portland, in mid-November, causing a brief power outage. Dietz declined to provide further details.

In Oregon, a spokesperson for Portland General Electric confirmed an attack on a substation “in the Clackamas area that occurred in late November 2022.” The utility declined to provide specifics of exactly when the incident occurred and what transpired.

Records obtained by Oregon Public Broadcasting and KUOW indicate the incident disrupted electricity in some areas of Clackamas County, knocking some of the county’s computer systems offline. Records show the incident occurred on Nov. 28, four days after the Bonneville Power Administration facility, also in Clackamas County, was damaged.

“Our teams have assessed the damage and begun repair to the impacted facilities,” Portland General Electric’s Allison Dobscha said in a statement Wednesday.

Seattle City Light, the sole power provider for the Northwest’s largest city, said it had not experienced any attacks.

“Because of these attacks, we’re making sure that we’re being extra vigilant,” Seattle City Light spokesperson Jenn Strang said. “We’re being very diligent about enforcing our physical security in and around our critical infrastructure.”

Traffic lights were dark, schools closed, and tens of thousands of people without power for days in central North Carolina after gunfire attacks on two electrical substations in rural Moore County Saturday night.

“What happened here Saturday night was a criminal act, and federal, state and local law enforcement are actively working to bring those responsible to justice,” North Carolina Gov. Roy Cooper said at a press conference on Monday.

After that incident, NewsNation reported that a federal bulletin had warned of attacks on power facilities, noting reports from utilities in Oregon and Washington.

Editor's note: *This story has been updated to include information about a Dec. 2 memo and attacks on substations in Cowlitz County, Washington. The attacks were confirmed after the story initially published. We have also removed the name of an official at Bonneville Power Administration's request due to security concerns.*

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<opb.org/article/2022/12/08/string-of-electrical-grid-attacks-in-pacific-northwest-are-unsolved>

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