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Grid agency issues advisories after Feb. blackout

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HOUSTON, June 26 (Reuters) - The North American electric grid watchdog issued three advisories on Thursday to urge utilities to take steps to avoid a repeat of events that ballooned into a four-hour blackout in Florida in February.

While electricity was restored to many Florida customers in an hour, the Feb. 26 event ranked a four out of five in severity, according to the North American Electric Reliability Corp (NERC).

About 1 million customers of four utilities across Florida lost power as emergency safety systems automatically went to work to prevent long-term damage to power plants and transmission equipment.

The outage involved the loss of 26 transmission lines, 4,500 megawatts of customer load and 4,300 MW of generation - including two nuclear reactors in South Florida.

Three other outages in the past year ranked a four or higher on the scale, NERC said, out of 33 events tracked.

"This event has brought to light a few key issues about the behavior of the system that the entire industry can use to improve the bulk power system's response to future disturbances," said Robert Cummings, NERC's director of events analysis, said in a statement.

Human error was cited as the primary cause of the blackout by FPL Group's (FPL.N: [Quote](#), [Profile](#), [Research](#), [Stock Buzz](#)) Florida utility Florida Power & Light just a few days after the event.

FPL's preliminary findings indicated that a field engineer diagnosing a problem switch at a west Miami substation disabled two levels of relay protection systems without authorization. Such safety systems are designed to isolate problems to one piece of equipment or one location.

Disabling both systems was contrary to FPL's standard practice, officials said.

NERC said one advisory was aimed at the root cause of the Florida outage - the worker's decision to disable key safety systems.

The grid agency urged the industry to review practices and procedures to ensure that proper authorizations are obtained before such measures are taken.

NERC's other advisories related to the ability of power plants to "ride-through" changes in voltage or frequency without disconnecting from the grid, the agency said.

NERC's action follows the release of an interim report from the Florida Reliability Coordinating Council (FRCC) which issued six recommendations.

NERC is a self-regulatory industry organization subject to oversight by the U.S. Federal Energy Regulatory Commission.

FPL's blackout was the largest to occur since mandatory reliability standards and penalties were put in place after the August 2003 Northeast blackout. (Reporting by Eileen O'Grady; Editing by Marguerita Choy)

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