

Lights in the storm

Stowe lineworkers help islands after hurricanes

By Caleigh Cross | Stowe Reporter Oct 12, 2017 Updated Oct 12, 2017



Stowe Electric Department lineworkers are on their way to St. Thomas to work with others from across New England to restore power to the U.S. Virgin Islands, battered by hurricanes Irma and Maria. Here, the Stowe Electric Department truck (at right) is waiting to be loaded onto a barge bound for the Virgin Islands.

Courtesy photo

Lineworkers from Stowe Electric Department are on their way to the U.S. Virgin Islands to help get the lights on after the islands were brutally battered by hurricanes Irma and Maria.

Irma made violent landfall on the islands in early September, followed two weeks later by Hurricane Maria.

The U.S. Virgin Islands are still largely without power, and that's where three lineworkers from Stowe Electric Department come in.

Silas Power, Adam Fortunati and Evan Bilodeau will take turns heading to St. Thomas, one of the three U.S. Virgin Islands, to restore power.

Power and Fortunati left Sunday, driving a Stowe Electric Department truck alongside a group from Burlington Electric Department. They dropped their truck and equipment off at Fort Lauderdale, Fla., Tuesday. It was loaded onto a barge and transported to St. Thomas by sea, while the crews fly in to meet it.

Bringing power back to St. Thomas will be a case of "starting over," Power said. He doesn't know yet what scenes await him.

Dave Kresock, director of operations at Stowe Electric Department, said, "From the pictures that I saw online, it looks like pretty much everything was just destroyed. None of the trees have any leaves on them. They're all splintered and ripped to shreds. I can only assume that the lines and everything are down. It sounds like they've been trying to get together a bunch of material over the past month — poles, transformers, wire, all that stuff. Pretty much it looks like the guys are going to be rebuilding the entire system."

Electricity also operates water pumps, which will be key to restoring potable water to Virgin Islanders.

Rebuilding the power grid will be hard work, but Power, Fortunati and Bilodeau do it across New England when calls go out for mutual aid after harsh winter storms.

They jumped at the chance to help storm-stricken St. Thomas.

Scott Edwards is the New England representative in the American Public Power Association, a group that organizes mutual aid for hard-hit areas in the United States. He was contacted and put out the call to member municipal utilities, including Stowe Electric Department.

“Ellen Burt responded right away that she was interested in helping out down in St. Thomas,” Edwards said.

He says New England crews have helped out in the U.S. Virgin Islands twice before — once in both the 1980s and 1990s.

“I said we’ve been down there before, we’re familiar with the area and the terrain and the climate and all that,” Edwards said.

Power said Stowe Electric Department was asked for help after Irma, but declined the call; after Maria, the department answered it.

“As soon as we heard about it, we wanted to go,” Power said. “I want to go help the people down there and get their power on, get back to their normal lives, and it’s also a great adventure to some place I’ve never been before.”

Power has been a lineworker with Stowe Electric Department for eight years. He’ll be in St. Thomas for between three and five weeks, and the crew will sleep in a vessel in the harbor as there are no available beds on island.

“I think we’ll be rebuilding lines from scratch, constructing new lines. I think most of the poles are broken and wires down,” Power said.

After Power and Fortunati return from the first wave of relief, Bilodeau and Kyle Sands, a lineworker with Washington Electric Coop, will take their place.

There’s no shortage of work to be done.

According to the website for the Virgin Islands Water and Power Authority, about 25 percent of the work to reconnect a pair of substations on St. Thomas has been completed. Some customers along a major highway in the islands’ capital, Charlotte Amalie, have had power restored, but it’s only the beginning.

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