

Explosion at electrical substation in Madison, Wisconsin, leaves thousands without power on hottest day of the year

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A massive explosion Friday morning at the main Madison Gas and Electric (MGE) substation in Madison, Wisconsin prompted Governor Tony Evers to declare a State of Emergency, which includes activating the Wisconsin National Guard.

The transformer explosion caused panic throughout the downtown area of the state's capital as windows violently shook and flames engulfed the electrical substation. Multiple fire crews and trucks were dispatched to combat the inferno as traffic lanes were shut down and nearby residents evacuated. So far no injuries have been reported related to the explosion, though thousands of residents were left without electricity throughout the day, subjecting them to the stresses associated with exposure to excessive heat.

No official explanation has been given as to the cause of the explosion that left, by some estimates, over 13,000 people without power throughout the day. Two large black clouds of smoke rolled over the city as power outages continued throughout the morning. Senior living homes were forced to rely on backup generators and fans to keep residents cool.

Some minor accommodations were made for the thousands without power. The Kohl Center, the University of Wisconsin's indoor sports arena, was made available for displaced residents until 6:00 P.M., as well as a few local libraries offered as "cool zones" for those looking to escape the dangerous heat. The National Weather Service had issued an "Excessive Heat Warning" earlier in the day urging people to "stay inside air conditioned rooms." Temperatures in Madison were measured at over 95 degrees Fahrenheit throughout the day with the heat index exceeding 105 degrees.

In a mid-afternoon press conference MGE Chief Executive Officer Jeff Keebler sought to pin the blame for the explosion on a piece of equipment belonging to the American Transmission Company (ATC).

The Blount Street substation, where the initial explosion and subsequent fire occurred, is jointly run by ATC and MGE. ATC owns and operates certain sections of the electric transmission system throughout Wisconsin and the upper Midwest. ATC is heading the investigation into a second fire that broke out at the East Campus Mall substation, following the initial blast. While officials have yet to confirm, it is believed the second fire, which occurred roughly half a mile away, was related to the initial blast.

"What I believe happened was there was a piece of ATC equipment that caught on fire, the two systems—the sub-station downtown and that system—are transmission connected," Keebler stated.

At approximately 7:40 A.M., Madison firefighters received a call regarding a fire occurring at the main electrical substation. By this time the transformer had already exploded, however power was still being transmitted from the station. In order to combat the raging inferno, MGE officials were forced to turn off the station, cutting power to thousands of residents and businesses. "We had to de-energize or turn off the equipment feeding our distribution system, so the fire department could come in and put out the fire," Keebler said.

This outage not only affected private homes disabling air conditioners and refrigeration, but several government buildings lost power as well.

The City-County building, which houses Madison Police Department's Central district lost power along

with several state office buildings. The police, however, with the unlimited resources made available to them, had a second “command post” ready to go complete with power, internet and air conditioning.

Meanwhile, “non-essential” state employees were told to go home by Governor Evers via Twitter, and the Capitol building remains closed.

The two fires were under control within an hour and extinguished by 9:00 A.M. However, the process of restoring power was ongoing throughout the day and officials from MGE and the government warned they could not guarantee all residents and businesses would have power restored by the end of the day.

MGE officials have been quick to dismiss the possibility that the explosion had anything to do with an “increased load” on the system due to the heat wave which is affecting over 200 million across North America. With the United States’ infrastructure collapsing under the weight of years austerity and neglect it is no surprise that this scenario would be the first to come to the minds of many.

As climate change continues to cause temperatures to rise and more extreme weather events to occur, the need for clean, renewable energy is a prerequisite for the continued survival of humanity. Electrical companies such as MGE tout their “net-zero carbon emission goals” and commitment to the toothless Paris agreement, while continuing to burn through fossil fuels such as coal.

According to MGE’s own 2018 annual report, renewable energy only accounted for 10.5 percent of their energy production. The burning of coal however was responsible for 52 percent of MGE’s production, and an additional 23 percent of energy is purchased from other Midwest energy companies, power that also most likely comes from coal. MGE’s parent company, MGE Energy posted \$368 million in profits in 2018.

The two main sources of MGE’s energy production are two coal firing plants, located in Oak Creek and Portage, Wisconsin. MGE is partial owner of both of these plants and its stockholders are guaranteed a return of investment of 12.7 percent return until 2050 from the Oak Creek plant and about 10 percent until 2038 from Columbia. With this “guaranteed” return, MGE and their shareholders, like all energy companies attempt to “have their cake and eat it too,” promising “clean energy” while continuing to profit off of one of the

leading contributors to climate change.



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