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Western adds to industry's Y2K plans

by Leslie Peterson and Don Nord

Nearly 300 Western employees will be working over New Year's to carry out our Y2K rollover plans. But these activities are really part of much broader plans that span all of North America and involve tens of thousands of workers.

Because electric power is a highly interdependent industry, Western has been actively involved in the Y2K planning of the Western Systems Coordination Council and the Mid-Continent Area Power Pool, as well as with local utility groups.

Together, we are taking actions to reduce the likelihood of problems, ensure the power system is resilient enough to withstand any that do occur and position us to fix them as soon as possible.

For example, the industry has stressed that posturing the grid to operate in an "interconnected" fashion will allow more system resiliency than scattered islanded, or isolated, operations. This will give the system greater stability.

During the rollover, critical facilities will be staffed and linked together by normal

communications, as well as backup communications like satellite phones. Western is linked not only internally, but also to WSCC, MAPP and many of our industry partners.

Everyone will have a good idea of what to expect because extensive contingency plans have been put in place and drilled.

WSCC and MAPP plans identify twice the normal level of additional generation units on-line and as available reserves, which in some cases are under the control of Western dispatchers. Considering that peak demands drop over holidays, this should provide flexibility if minor grid problems arise.

Fossil fuel plants are also stocking up on fuel needed to generate electricity and coordinate with their suppliers. Hydro reservoirs will be adjusted to ensure optimum reserve capacity is available.

All utilities, including Western, are deferring short-term maintenance during the rollover period. Western will follow the industry directives limiting the amount of energy transfers allowed across key transmission facilities. This will allow transmission lines to have the capacity needed to rapidly respond to problems. Schedulers will halt solely economic transactions between 10 p.m., Dec. 31 and 2 a.m., Jan. 1, to further reduce the load on the system.

Over the rollover, staff will follow established reporting requirements and follow contingency plans should problems arise. While no catastrophic problems are envisioned, some minor ones could occur. Should something big occur, Western and our partners have drilled blackstart procedures and operations crews have practiced manual data reporting procedures.

After the rollover, there will be a transition from alert status to normal operations. Staffed facilities will report in and confirm an all-clear status. Jan. 1 usually sees changes in scheduled long-term energy transfers. To ensure a stable transition, operating facilities will spread the changes gradually over a wider time frame to avoid sudden shifts around midnight Dec. 31. Gradual transitioning should allow the grid to return to regular operations with the maximum reliability and minimum impacts to marketing.

Western's activities during the rollover directly contribute to the electric power industry's preparedness. That, in turn, gives us the confidence to tell customers that the lights will stay on come New Year's.

