

Utila East Wind

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Dedicated to Utila

FREE

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UPCO - Problems past & present

Beaches empty in wake of power crisis

By Steve Dankewich

The power situation on Utila has become desperate. We have now gone back to the good old days when power was rationed out like rice in Somalia.

The problem with the power and price of power today can be traced back to before UPCO existed. This was when Robert Blenker of TVIG came to the island promising cheap, reliable and environmentally friendly wind power to the islanders. They were very convincing with all their promises and managed to attract plenty of local investment (over half a million dollars). It was easy for TVIG to get the support of the town. 24 hour electricity at 0.11 cents USD per kilowatt! And at the time, the local government was desperate for a solution. Remember, in those days we were dealing with sectioned power for almost a full year and months of complete darkness. Utila's tourist industry was crumbling due to the failure of the ENEE power generators. There were tonnes of problems and TVIG had the only solution. In the end, The Utila Power Company (UPCO) was formed with TVIG being a major shareholder and providing logistical and management support for the company. UPCO was granted the concession of the grid, secured a loan with BGA for 1.8 Million USD and some months later UPCO was on-line serving 24 hour electricity to Utila for the first time. A great day for Utila, A relief.

Unfortunately, power would not be cheap, it would be expensive. We are now paying 0.29 cents USD per kilowatt and we can be sure this price will not go down. But why? There are plenty of explanations from transport costs to bank debts. There was also plenty of interest as to how a total of 2.3 Million dollars could be spent on the improvements to

the power infrastructure during the construction phase and there were many enquiries regarding the accounting.

In the end TVIG, for unspecified reasons, turned in their shares and left Utila. When they left, all of the technical support and administration services that were to be provided to UPCO left with them, leaving the local staff to operate the power grid.

So here we are. I do not think the blame falls with the employees of the company. They have been working double shifts over the course of the current power crisis and have faced a lot of negative comments from the people. We should try to understand their situation. Everyone is frustrated and disappointed by the power situation over the last weeks. UPCO has estimated that their losses just from Semana Santa week were 1,000,000.00 Lempira and these losses are just the beginning. The local economy, the reputation of the island and quality of life of the people are all being affected.

PROBLEMS:

Dirty fuel has been identified as a possible factor in the many mechanical failures that have plagued UPCO in the past weeks. There were many shutdowns to change fuel filters because of the bad fuel and other mechanical problems soon followed. There has been no direct connection established confirming that the bad fuel gave cause to existing mechanical problems, but, samples of the fuel in the tanks proved to have water and suspended particles that would prevent the engines from running properly. This fuel has now been removed from UPCO tanks and replaced with clean fuel by the supplier.

The mechanical problems at UPCO are as follows:
UPCO has a total of three generators. One 1.50 Megawatt generator and two 0.75 Megawatt generators.

1. 1.5 Megawatt generator- offline. The problem caused by salt build-up on the generator coil combined with condensation from morning dew, resulting in a short circuit that burnt the generator. This generator section will need to be re-wound or replaced.

2. 0.75 Megawatt generator A- off-line. Due to an undetermined problem in the circuitry. Technicians are on the island now working on this problem.

3. 0.75 Megawatt generator B- operational, and is the sole supplier of power to the entire island. This generator does not have the capacity to supply power to the entire island and this is why the power is on in some areas and off in others.

The number one thing we can all do is conserve energy. When you have power, use it sparingly until the repairs are completed. With only one generator in operation we need to see that it is not overburdened. If this one goes we will be in darkness. Then we will really be back to the good old days.

*****UPDATE May 2, 2006: It has now been confirmed that the fuel pumps were damaged by bad fuel. UPCO is working to re-build or replace these pumps. At time of printing all generators were off-line. Now that the root cause of the engine failures is determined, normal power could resume within days. Keep the faith.

*****Due to the problems with the power we do not know when we will be able to send this issue to the printer. This means that by the time it arrives on the island the problems with the power might be resolved.

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