

WI National Guard: GridEx exercise helps build partnerships, capacity to respond to power grid threats

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MADISON, Wis. — An exercise that took place Nov. 14-16 in Columbia County and Madison yielded important lessons for local, state, federal, military and private industry partners responding to threats to the power grid.

Known as GridEx, the exercise tested law enforcement agencies, other first responders, the Wisconsin National Guard, county and state agencies and private utilities who faced physical and cyber-related threats as part of the scenario. GridEx is a national-level exercise that also played out at other sites around the country.

“A power outage presents serious challenges because we rely on power for everything –

communications, water, wastewater, fuel, healthcare, banking and other lifeline services would be severely disrupted,” said Greg Engle, the director of Wisconsin Emergency Management’s planning and preparedness bureau. “We also need power to deliver law enforcement and other emergency services, so we need to plan for alternative ways to operate when the power is out.”

Engle said that during a long-term power outage similar to the scenario planners faced during GridEx, the need for fuel for vehicles and generators to keep hospitals, communications, water utilities and other critical infrastructure running would be of paramount importance. The state emergency operations center is where state officials, the National Guard, volunteer organizations, utilities and other private

sector partners work collaboratively to solve these sorts of issues and support local communities during emergencies.

“We simply cannot simulate the kind of training we were able to conduct during GridEx,” Brig. Gen. David O’Donahue, the Wisconsin National Guard’s deputy adjutant general for civil support said. “Discovery learning makes us think differently on how to support critical infrastructure and Wisconsin Emergency Management.”

More than two years in the making, the exercise incorporated long-term power outages, cyber responses and physical security measures and required cooperation between a diverse group of organizations, including transmission providers and utilities like Alliant Energy, which graciously allowed the use of its Columbia County facility as a training site.

“Alliant Energy was pleased to provide a venue and have the opportunity to partner with the Wisconsin National Guard and all of the participating entities,” said David de Leon, Vice President Operations – Wisconsin at Alliant Energy. “We look forward to our continued efforts to build upon this public-private partnership that plays a key role in emergency preparedness and response.”

Approximately 120 first responders, utilities partners and personnel representing Wisconsin Emergency Management and other state agencies joined approximately 65 Soldiers from the Wisconsin National Guard Reaction Force and another 35 Soldiers and Airmen from the National Guard’s joint staff in Madison in participating. Personnel from Columbia County and a number of federal agencies, including the FBI and FEMA Region V, all participated as well alongside Wisconsin’s Emergency Operations Center and the state’s Business Emergency Operations Center.

Building those partnerships and relationships now, during training, is one of the key takeaways from exercises like GridEx.

Kathy Johnson, Columbia County’s emergency management coordinator, agreed.

“The training that resulted from working together on this, especially the county law enforcement with the State Patrol, the National Guard and the Alliant Energy personnel in unified command was invaluable,” Johnson said. “We activated the Columbia County Emergency Operations Center and worked side-by-side with the folks that would be involved in a real world incident. With that being said, I feel that

our county and state are so much more prepared than we were prior to this exercise and need to continue the working relationships between the public/private partnerships.”

The Wisconsin National Guard trains regularly to support civil authorities during times of emergency as part of its dual-mission to serve not only as the primary combat reserve of the Army and Air Force, but also as the state’s first military responder. GridEx provided another great opportunity to continue to build that capacity.

“The importance is getting us to communicate better with the local law enforcement and working with those assets and for them to see us an asset too,” Spc. Quentin Olcott, with the Wisconsin National Guard’s Troop A, 1st Squadron, 105th Cavalry said while participating in the exercise in Columbia County. Soldiers from 1st Squadron, 105th Cavalry make up the National Guard Reaction Force.

The officer in charge of the National Guard reaction force, 1st Lt. Mathew Wong, echoed that sentiment.

“The biggest takeaway is getting in and working with civilian entities that we normally don’t get a chance to work with,” Wong said.

He noted the complexities of bringing together different agencies for a unified effort, all of whom use different radio systems, have different chains of command and ways of operating.

“Overall, working with these guys was excellent,” Wong said of the other agencies with which his unit worked in Columbia County. “They all put their hat on and they grabbed the bull by the horns for what role they took on.”

Wong said the Wisconsin National Guard Reaction Force has gained a lot of great experience in recent years from training events like GridEx, the 2016 Miles Paratus exercise and its validation in 2015, but also from real-world responses like Hurricane Irma in September and its flood response mission in Burlington, Wisconsin in July.

“Domestic operations is nothing new for the 105th, and our guys handled it very well,” he said. “They are always very professional, and the guys did very well.”

GridEx participants will apply the lessons they learned in during the exercise to an

even larger exercise in May 2017, known as Dark Sky, when nearly 1,000 responders are expected to participate in an exercise across five Wisconsin counties.

“These exercises are critical for our preparedness,” Engle said. “Our job is to ensure that we are ready if and when disaster strikes, and we do that by planning, training, and building partnerships every day.”