

WI National Guard: Dark Sky exercise slated for May 15-17 at sites across state

Posted on Monday, Apr 23, 2018

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by Capt. Joe Trovato

MADISON, Wis. — A full-scale training exercise simulating a long-term mass power outage in Wisconsin kicks off May 15 at sites around the state.

Known as Dark Sky, the exercise runs May 15-17 in Brown, Calumet, Dane, Fond du Lac, Milwaukee, Outagamie and Winnebago Counties and will test the abilities of private utilities, law enforcement, first responders and the National Guard to respond to the scenario as well as its second and third order effects.

The public should not be concerned if they notice an increased emergency responder presence, military personnel, vehicles and equipment, or non-military unmanned aerial vehicles operating in their communities during the exercise. The exercise includes an Alliant Energy facility in Fond du Lac County, which will serve as one of the National Guard training sites.

The goal of the exercise is to increase understanding of the coordination, policies, and procedures required to conduct a joint inter-agency response to cyber and physical threats to critical infrastructure in Wisconsin.

“Dark Sky provides an incredible opportunity for our first responders, the National Guard, emergency management officials, and our private utilities industry partners to exercise our processes now so we are better prepared for threats to our power grid,” Maj. Gen. Don Dunbar, Wisconsin’s adjutant general said. “Our emergency management community must be prepared to deal with the myriad scenarios and challenges posed by a long-term mass power outage, and by training together, we continue building meaningful relationships that leave us better positioned to respond to a real-world situation.”

More than 1,000 participants from the state Emergency Operations Center, the Business Emergency Operations Center, the Wisconsin National Guard, county emergency operations centers, municipal command posts, the American Red Cross, and federal agencies will participate in the exercise.

The Dark Sky scenario includes a variety of incidents that require local, county, and state-level response operations designed to exercise each participating unit and agency. The Wisconsin National Guard will exercise its joint staff and the National Guard Reaction Force in support of private utilities partners, nongovernmental organizations, and local, county, state, and federal agencies for infrastructure security. As part of the exercise, Wisconsin National Guard Soldiers will conduct door-to-door health and welfare checks in Omro, Wisconsin.

The exercise will also test the abilities of public and private sector partners to work directly with local citizens impacted by critical infrastructure failures and to coordinate critical fuel distribution, cyber response, intelligence sharing, and mass care shelters as well as procedures for opening and operating the state’s Business Emergency Operations Center.

The exercise represents the final phase in a series of related exercises that culminate in Dark Sky. In November 2017, the Wisconsin Department of Military Affairs and private utilities partners conducted GridEx in Columbia and Dane Counties. GridEx also simulated a cyber and physical threat to the power grid resulting in a Wisconsin National Guard response. In February, the annual Statewide Interoperable Mobile Communications — or SIMCOM — exercise simulated a notional winter ice emergency that affected 600,000 people and disconnected power to about 50,000 people.

The relationships developed between the Wisconsin Department of Military Affairs and private utilities in Wisconsin during the previous exercises have further honed public-private response capabilities and laid the groundwork for continued success in the Dark Sky exercise.