

Computer trouble at Ohio utility preceded blackout 9/5/03

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USA TODAY

WASHINGTON — Computer and software problems in the control room of besieged Ohio utility FirstEnergy may have been a major cause of the record Northeast power blackout on Aug. 14, according to congressional testimony and documents released Thursday.

At least 2½ hours before the 4 p.m. blackout, FirstEnergy technicians who monitor the company's power lines got several telephone calls from power plant operators, warning of serious problems on the Midwestern electricity grid. They had seen odd surges of power, shutdowns of some power plants and transmission lines overloaded with electricity.

But the FirstEnergy operators said they could not see anything wrong on their control screens, according to Rep.

James Greenwood, R-Pa., of the House Energy and Commerce Committee, which concluded a two-day hearing Thursday on the blackout.

"These guys may have been flying blind," Greenwood said in an interview afterward. "It appears they may have been looking at their (computer) screens, and the screens were not giving them the right information."

According to Greenwood and energy experts, officials are investigating several possible causes of the blackout, from equipment failure to human error.

Congressional investigators are particularly intrigued by the computer snafu, including a possible breakdown of an industrial software system called SCADA, or Supervisory Control and Data Acquisition, which feeds real-time transmission data to power companies and grid operators.

In the hours before the blackout,



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Greenwood:
Probing causes.

technicians were baffled by the worsening problems on the grid, according to a transcript of telephone calls between power firms and the Midwest Independent Transmission System Operator, the entity that oversees

the power grid in that region.

In one exchange, a grid manager said, "I called you guys a bit ago to find out what was going on because I saw. . . ."

A FirstEnergy control-room official named Jerry Snickey replied, "We have no clue. Our computer is giving us fits, too. We don't even know the status of some of the stuff around us."

FirstEnergy CEO Peter Burg defended his firm, saying FirstEnergy could not have been the main cause of the blackout, which swept over eight states and part of Canada.

Burg said that FirstEnergy's power flow was stable until the blackout hit shortly after 4 p.m. In an interview later, he repeated FirstEnergy's earlier explanation that a control-room alarm failed.

"We're trying hard not to throw stones (until the investigations are done)," Burg told the lawmakers.

During the hearing, U.S. Rep. Edward Markey, D-Mass., said the so-called Slammer computer worm struck FirstEnergy's Davis-Besse nuclear plant earlier this year, and he asked Burg if a computer virus could have hurt FirstEnergy the day of the blackout.

Burg replied that FirstEnergy's computers were not vulnerable to the Slammer worm.