

US facing summer power outages

By KATHERINE BLUNT

The Australian

Tuesday 10th May 2022

487 words

Page 18 | Section: General

156cm on the page



US facing summer power outages

KATHERINE BLUNT

From California to Texas to Indiana, electric grid operators are warning that power-generating capacity is struggling to keep up with demand, a gap that could lead to rolling blackouts during heatwaves or other peak periods as soon as this year.

California's grid operator said on Friday that it expected a shortfall in supplies this summer, especially if extreme heat, wildfires or delays in bringing new power sources online exacerbate the constraints.

The Midcontinent Independent System Operator, or MISO, which oversees a large regional grid spanning much of the Midwest, said last month that capacity shortages could force it to take emergency measures to meet summer demand and

flagged the risk of outages.

In Texas, where a number of power plants lately went offline for maintenance, the grid operator warned of tight conditions during a heatwave expected to last into the next week.

The risk of electricity shortages is rising throughout the US as traditional power plants are being retired more quickly than they can be replaced by renewable energy and battery storage.

Power grids are feeling the strain as the US makes a historic transition from conventional power plants fuelled by coal and natural gas to cleaner forms of energy such as wind and solar power, and ageing nuclear plants are slated for retirement in many parts of the country.

The challenge is that wind and solar farms don't produce electricity at all times and need large batteries to store their output for later use. While a large amount of battery storage is under development, regional grid operators have warned that the pace may not be fast enough to offset the closures of traditional power plants.

Speeding up the build-out of renewable energy and batteries has become an especially difficult proposition amid supply chain challenges and inflation.

Most recently, a probe by the Commerce Department into whether Chinese solar manufacturers are circumventing trade tariffs on solar panels has halted imports of key components needed to build new solar farms and effectively brought the US solar industry to a standstill.

Faced with the prospect of having to call for blackouts when demand exceeds supply, many grid operators are now grappling with the same question: How to encourage the build-out of batteries and other technologies while keeping traditional power plants from closing too quickly.

"Every market around the world is trying to deal with the same issue," said Brad Jones, interim CEO of the Electric Reliability Council of Texas.

"We're all trying to find ways to utilise as much of our renewable resources as possible ... and make sure that we have enough dispatchable generation to manage reliability."

The risk of outages comes amid other challenges straining the grid. Large outages have occurred with greater frequency over the past two decades, in part because the grid has become more vulnerable with age and an uptick in severe weather exacerbated by climate change.