

The ESCC's Cyber Mutual Assistance Program

The Electric Power and Natural Gas Industries Share Expertise to Counter Cyber Attacks



Cyber Defense: Building on the Industry's Culture of Mutual Aid

The North American energy grid is a complex interconnected network of generation, transmission, and distribution systems operated by thousands of organizations. Protecting the energy grid and ensuring a reliable and affordable supply of energy are the top priorities of the electric power and natural gas industries. Creating a “defense-in-depth” approach requires partnerships and coordination with the government and other critical infrastructure sectors. To coordinate security strategies with the federal government and other stakeholders, the electric power industry has created a CEO-led partnership called the Electricity Subsector Coordinating Council (ESCC).

For decades, the electric power and natural gas industries have operated voluntary mutual assistance programs that work collaboratively to restore service following storms, earthquakes, wildfires, and other natural disasters. These mutual assistance programs provide a formal, yet flexible, process for companies to request assistance from one another.

Building on the industries’ culture of mutual assistance, and informed by lessons learned from major destructive cyber incidents overseas as well as by exercises held in North America, the ESCC directed the formation of the Cyber Mutual Assistance (CMA) Program. The Program is a natural extension of the electric power and natural gas industries’ long-standing approach of sharing critical personnel and equipment when responding to emergencies. By coordinating with the government and providing mutual assistance to address cyber threats, the electric power and natural gas industries are enhancing our nation’s ability to defend and protect against threats and to meet customers’ expectations.

Delivering and Coordinating Cyber Mutual Assistance: How It Works

- The CMA Program is composed of industry cyber experts who are able to provide voluntary assistance to each other in advance of, or in the event of, a disruption of electric or natural gas service, systems, and/or IT infrastructure due to a cyber emergency.
- Participation in the CMA Program is open to all entities that provide or materially support the provision of electricity or natural gas service.
- Participation in the CMA Program, as well as any decision to respond to requests for assistance made under the CMA Program, is voluntary.
- To participate in the CMA Program, entities must execute a mutual non-disclosure agreement so that all participants are assured that confidential information they may share will be protected.
- Participating entities also must designate an individual with appropriate cyber skills and experience, and the necessary authority, to represent the entity in the CMA Program (the CMA Coordinator).
- Cyber mutual assistance under the CMA Program is intended to be advisory and short-term. It may include services, personnel, and/or equipment.
- There is no cost to participate in the CMA Program other than the reimbursement of the costs and expenses of an entity providing emergency cyber assistance.

Frequently Asked Questions About Cyber Mutual Assistance

What is the Cyber Mutual Assistance Program?

The Cyber Mutual Assistance (CMA) Program is an industry framework developed at the direction of the ESCC to provide emergency cyber assistance within the electric power and natural gas industries. The CMA Program is composed of industry cyber experts who can provide voluntary assistance to other participating entities in advance of, or in the event of, a disruption of electric or natural gas service, systems, and/or IT infrastructure due to a cyber emergency. As the CMA Program develops, additional initiatives will be considered and implemented based on the needs and input of the entities participating in the CMA Program.

How can I participate in the CMA Program?

To participate in the CMA Program, each participating entity must (1) sign a mutual non-disclosure agreement, and (2) designate a CMA Coordinator.

What does a CMA Coordinator do?

A CMA Coordinator is a participating entity's primary point of contact for all matters related to the CMA Program. He or she is responsible for assessing relevant cyber resources, considering and responding to another participating entity's request for assistance, and making any requests for emergency assistance on behalf of the entity he or she represents.

What are the qualifications for a CMA Coordinator?

A CMA Coordinator must be an individual with sufficient authority to act on behalf of the participating entity he or she represents. In addition, a CMA Coordinator must possess or manage sufficient cybersecurity, operating technology, and information technology skills and experience to be able to request, or respond to a request for, a broad range of emergency cyber needs in the context of a potentially complex and evolving cyber emergency.

How does the Program work?

In the event of a cyber emergency, any participating entity may make a direct request for assistance through its CMA Coordinator to any other CMA Coordinator, or may make a broader request to multiple or all CMA Coordinators. Requests for assistance may be made in response to a particular cyber emergency or in advance of a threatened or anticipated cyber emergency.

What kind of assistance is provided under the CMA Program?

In responding to a request for assistance, a participating entity's response is voluntary, intended to be advisory in nature, and provided on a short-term basis. Assistance may include services, personnel, and/or equipment.

Who is participating in the CMA Program?

Currently more than 140 entities, representing electric and natural gas investor-owned companies, public power utilities, electric cooperatives, Regional Transmission Organizations and Independent System Operators, and Canadian energy companies, participate in the CMA Program. These entities cover approximately 80 percent of U.S. electricity customers, roughly 75 percent of U.S. domestic natural gas customers, and approximately 1.25 million electricity customers in Canada.