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Windstorm shakes analytics

The six weeks of rolling storms in 2006, including one that flattened parts of Stanley Park, left more people without power, he said. Hydro is also accustomed to getting power back on within 24 hours, even with major winter outages that can leave up to 150,000 people without power.

But Saturday's windstorm and outages — nearly 2,000 incident reports between Vancouver Island to the west, Sunshine Coast to the north and Hope to the east — quickly overwhelmed Hydro's capabilities. The winds were so severe that they not only blew down trees and branches across hundreds of the 25,000-volt distribution lines that feed houses, but also 25 important 60,000-volt transmission lines feeding a number of substations. At one point, key substations in North Vancouver, Langley and Surrey were all offline.

"We kind of started to see it almost everywhere at once," Martell said. "It started off with a couple thousand, 15,000, 20,000, and then very quickly it rose up to the significant numbers of where we saw, within four hours, we were up to over 400,000 customers without service."

What worries Martell now is that he's seeing a change in the kind of weather events that can disrupt the region's power.

"We're starting to see weather we've never seen before, patterns that are not as predictable as what people who have been around a long time get used to seeing. We have good weather service information. This unpredictable stuff that is coming along that is causing a lot of trouble — not just for us — is very difficult to anticipate," he said.

Martell isn't the only one thinking that way. Sadhu Johnston, Vancouver's deputy city manager, views the windstorm as just one weather event in a summer that has climate change written all over it.

"If you look at the summer as a whole, this will go down in history as the first summer

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WAYNE MARTELL

REGIONAL MANAGER OF DISTRIBUTION,
BC HYDRO

Vancouver really experienced climate change," he said. "Think about air quality problems due to the extreme fires, the drought, the water shortages, extended periods of heat and then followed by extreme storm events. All we're missing here is very high water levels."

Johnston said the city has been predicting this kind of unusual weather for a while. In 2012 city council approved a climate adaptation strategy that called for changes in how the city plans for extreme weather events. It began planting different types of drought-tolerant trees as part of its 2020 Greenest City plan.

That effort had little impact on Saturday's windstorm. The city immediately lost more than 500 street trees, many of which were weakened by the summer's drought. Many more may be found to be damaged in post-storm inspections.

Both Martell and Johnston said the drought dried out roots, branches and leaves, creating the opportunity for trees to topple and branches to land on electricity lines with impunity.

Johnston said the city had expected heavy rains Saturday and had put its emergency operations centre on standby early in the morning. But when the wind hit and the city's 311 switchboard began to light up with the first of 1,500 calls, Johnston opened the EOC at noon. It stayed open until 11 p.m. Sunday.

When a tree crashed down across busy 12th Avenue just

before it turns into Grandview Highway, Johnston knew the city was witnessing an unusual weather event.

The Pacific National Exhibition closed its fair on Saturday briefly because of the high winds, but reopened and offered free general admission.

While the fair went on, Hydro scrambled with a looming labour shortage. It called in both contract and staff crews from as far away as Prince George, Terrace and Fort St. John. Trucks with crews that could be pressed into service in Kamloops and Kelowna were driven through the night Saturday. Power-line technicians from farther away were told to jump on aircraft with their linesmen's tools and join trucks when they arrived.

As of Monday afternoon, Hydro had 326 people working 16-hour days, with eight hours in between for rest, to connect service. Martell said Hydro has also received offers of help from other utilities including Fortis, but has declined for now.

The city also has 75 crews out cleaning up the remains of its street trees. Among the hardest hit areas are the Hastings-Sunrise and east Vancouver neighbourhoods.

Both Hydro and the city say it is too early to determine the cost of the storm for insurance purposes. But Johnston said the city has already started to receive claims from homeowners for substantial damage done to houses, fences and garages.

ICBC says it also received more than 3,500 vehicle damage claims calls on Saturday and Sunday. Spokesman Adam Grossman said ICBC's eClaim online system normally records 70 or 80 claims per day on weekends but this weekend received more than 500.

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