

POWER:

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of smart meters that would tell HES when the power is out.

Currently, the utility depends on customers to report when their lights go out, and then depends on a visual check of the neighborhood to assess how far the blackout extends.

"We're still driving around with our head out the window," Rivera said.

A smart meter system would alert HES as soon as the power goes out and give a map of the outage, allowing crews to more quickly pinpoint the problem and begin working to fix it. It would also save on operational costs for meter reading and allow HES to give customers a more detailed account of how their power use fluctuates throughout the day.

The estimated cost would be between \$1.5 million and \$1.75 million.

On Monday Rivera presented the reliability numbers for HES, noting that

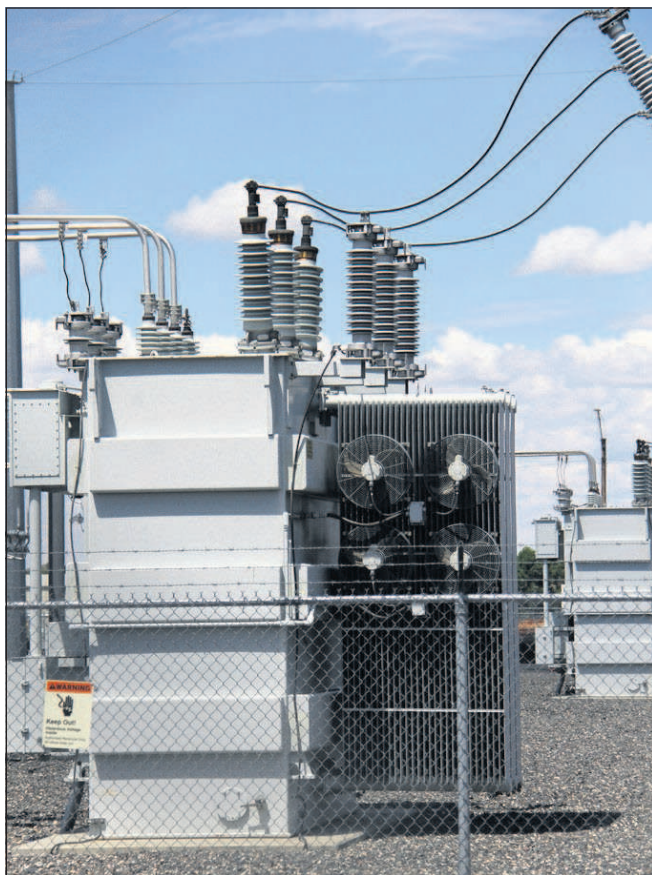
in 2015 Hermiston Energy Services customers were without power for an average of 3.5 hours over the year.

The average, however, is not spread out evenly. Some connected to the Butte substation, for example, experienced power outages on May 18, May 13 and Feb. 22 while other HES customers have not experienced any disruption in service all year.

A mid-2014 comparison by the *East Oregonian* found that HES customers were without power an average of 3.6 hours over the course of 12 months, compared with 3.1 hours at Umatilla Electric Cooperative, 1.4 hours with Pacific Power and less than a minute with Milton-Freewater Electric.

"We're providing service 99.96 percent of the time, but people notice when it's off," Rivera said.

Improving reliability costs money, however, and Hermiston Energy Services doesn't have as much as it used to. The utility didn't raise rates between



STAFF PHOTO BY GARY L. WEST

Electrical equipment at a substation near the Umatilla Electric Cooperative office on West Elm Avenue help supply power to Umatilla Electric and Hermiston Energy Services.

2003 and 2015, preferring to subsidize operating costs through its reserve fund rather than increasing

rates. As a result, HES rates for the average residential customer run at about \$116 per month, compared to \$118 for UEC, \$199 for PGE and \$227 for Pacific Power.

Rivera said in 2014-2015 alone the utility used almost \$1 million of its reserves, which is why the city implemented an 11 percent rate increase in 2015.

Much of the increased cost of doing business came from continued increases in price from Bonneville Power Administration, which sells Hermiston Energy Services its wholesale power. Those increases are expected to continue on a regular basis.

To put HES operations in the black and also come up with the money for capital improvement, Rivera recommended the city approve a rate increase of approximately 4.4 percent for the coming fiscal year and a similar or larger increase the year after.

He also recommended that the city refinance the bond that funded the for-

mation of the municipal utility in 2001. There are currently 17 years left on the bond, and various refinancing options would save the city money on interest payments.

Rivera said the budget he has submitted for 2016-2017 includes \$500,000 for the new substation, and a bond refinance would mean that the utility only had to pay on interest, not principal, in 2016-2017, providing an extra \$450,000 in savings to also pay for the new substation.

"It really makes sense for us to look at this," he said.

City councilors and Mayor David Drotzmann agreed.

"We can't keep using our savings," Drotzmann said. "That's not sustainable."

Nothing was adopted at Monday's meeting, but Rivera said now that he has direction from the council he will put something together on the refinance and rate increase and come back to the council later in the summer.

FIRE:

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a sedan. The four motorcyclists were traveling together from Tacoma, Washington.

A LifeFlight helicopter flew one victim from the scene and ambulances took three other injured people to Good Shepherd Medical Center in Hermiston.

As bystanders and later first responders worked to take care of the injured, flames flared up multiple times along the side of the road, at one point jumping the interstate and burning the sagebrush in the median where the crash scattered debris. All four lanes were closed to traffic for several hours.

Hermiston Fire & Emergency Services spokesperson J.W. Roberts at about 4:30 p.m. said the fire was 30 percent contained and mop-up and patrol operations would go on for hours. The fire burned over 3,000 acres and consumed one small building, a larger, vacant building and power poles.

About 70 responders in all were at the fire, he said, from fire agencies in Umatilla and Morrow counties, plus members of the Oregon Military Department, state police and transpor-



STAFF PHOTO BY E.J. HARRIS

Traffic stands still in the southbound lane of Interstate 82 after a wreck near a wildfire on the Umatilla Army Depot on Monday west of Hermiston. Smoke caused multiple accidents on the freeway, causing authorities to close the interstate.

tation department and the U.S. Bureau of Indian Affairs. In total, 19 engines and seven water tenders were dispatched, according to information from Hermiston Fire Chief Scott Stanton.

The spark of the fire may have come from an

Oregon Army National Guard member training with an "artillery simulation round," Roberts said, though the state military department considers the cause under investigation.

The U.S. Army is in the process of transferring the Umatilla Chemical De-



STAFF PHOTO BY E.J. HARRIS

The headlights of fire vehicle can be seen though heavy smoke as flames erupt as fire burns into a patch of sagebrush on Monday at a wildfire on the Umatilla Army Depot west of Hermiston.

pot land to the Columbia Development Authority, a partnership of local government entities. Part of the land will be used for a National Guard training base, part of it will function as a nature preserve

and some of it has been zoned industrial and will be marketed for economic development.

Greg Smith, executive director of the Columbia Development Authority, said the fire shouldn't de-

lay transfer of the land, which is anticipated in spring 2017. The nature of the National Guard activities — including firearms training — coupled with the acres of dry sagebrush always has made fire a concern on the property, he said. This fire just underscores how "critical" the conversation with the Army is about making sure there is sufficient water on site for fire suppression.

Smith said the moment the land is transferred to the CDA they will sign agreements with area fire districts in Umatilla County and Morrow County to make sure the people and property on the land are protected, while also making sure those districts benefit from the expanded tax base that development of the property will bring

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