The ESCC’s Cyber Mutual Assistance Program

The Electric Power Industry Shares 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 industry. 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 industry has operated voluntary mutual assistance programs that work collaboratively to restore electricity 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.

Today, the industry’s culture of mutual assistance is a model for creating responses to cyber threats to the energy grid. Based on lessons from major destructive cyber incidents overseas, and from exercises in North America, the ESCC recommended the formation of a Cyber Mutual Assistance (CMA) Program: a series of initiatives that are a natural extension of the electric power industry’s longstanding 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 industry is greatly 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 first initiative undertaken by the CMA Program is the creation of a Pool of industry cyber experts who are able to provide voluntary assistance to each other in the event of cyber disruptions to the energy grid.
- Participation in the Pool is open to all organizations that provide or materially support the provision of electricity.
- Participation in the Pool and response to requests for assistance made within the Pool are voluntary. There is no cost for organizations to participate in the Pool (other than the reimbursement of the expenses incurred in providing emergency cyber assistance).
- To participate in the Pool, organizations must execute a mutual non-disclosure agreement so that all participants are assured that confidential information they may share will be protected.
- Each participant in the Pool must designate one employee with appropriate cyber skills and experience, and the necessary authority, to represent the participant in the Pool (the CMA Coordinator).
- Cyber mutual assistance is intended to be advisory and short-term. It may include services, personnel, and/or equipment.
What is the Cyber Mutual Assistance Program?

The Cyber Mutual Assistance (CMA) Program refers to a series of industry initiatives developed at the direction of the ESCC to provide emergency cyber assistance within the electric power industry. The first initiative under the CMA Program is the development of a Pool of industry cyber experts who can provide voluntary assistance to other organizations in the event of a disruption to the energy grid 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?

In order to participate in the CMA Program, each participating entity must (1) sign a Mutual Non-Disclosure and Use of Information Agreement, and (2) also designate a Cyber Mutual Assistance Coordinator (CMA Coordinator).

What does a CMA Coordinator do?

A CMA Coordinator is a participant’s single point of contact for all matters related to the CMA Program, including the Pool. He or she is responsible for assessing his/her organization’s cyber resources and responding to another participant’s request for assistance, or making a request for emergency assistance on behalf of his or her company. He or she also is responsible for preparing and coordinating internal resources in connection with any assistance that his or her participating entity elects to provide.

What are the qualifications for a CMA Coordinator?

A CMA Coordinator must be a senior-level employee of a participating entity with the authority to act on behalf of the participating entity it represents. In addition, he or she must be an expert who possesses or manages sufficient cybersecurity, operating technology, and information technology skills and experience in order 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. He or she must have sufficient understanding of the cyber functions, security, recovery processes, and available resources at his or her participating entity.

How does the Pool work?

In the event of a cyber emergency, any participant 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.

What kind of assistance is provided by the Pool?

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.

For more information about the CMA Program or to become a participant, please visit www.electricitysubsector.org/CMA or contact cma@electricitysubsector.org.

April 2017