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PowerSouth Case Study

Since 1941, PowerSouth Energy Cooperative — headquartered in Andalusia, Alabama — has remained a trusted wholesale energy provider for its 20 distribution members, who provide electric energy to more than 1 million consumers in 49 counties across Alabama and northwest Florida. PowerSouth also manages after-hours customer service for energy consumers, serving as a service backup for its smaller neighboring utilities.

With its operations located just 63 miles from the Gulf coast, PowerSouth is no stranger to weather extremes — with its power-generating capabilities equally at risk from the punch packed by tropical storms and hurricanes as it is from extreme cold and tree-toppling ice storms.



Balancing Resources and Consumer Needs

Regardless of the conditions, the 100 employees who staff PowerSouth's Energy Control Center and Customer Response Center in Andalusia, Alabama need a communications backbone that can manage the very delicate balance between its employees and consumers, and the more than 2,200 lines that deliver 2,000 megawatts of always-on, life-enabling power.

Responsible to protect the welfare of 600 employees and ensure uninterrupted service to more than 1 million consumers, PowerSouth's team counts on reliable, fail-safe dispatching equipment to ensure it is able to provide accurate, courteous and timely customer service.

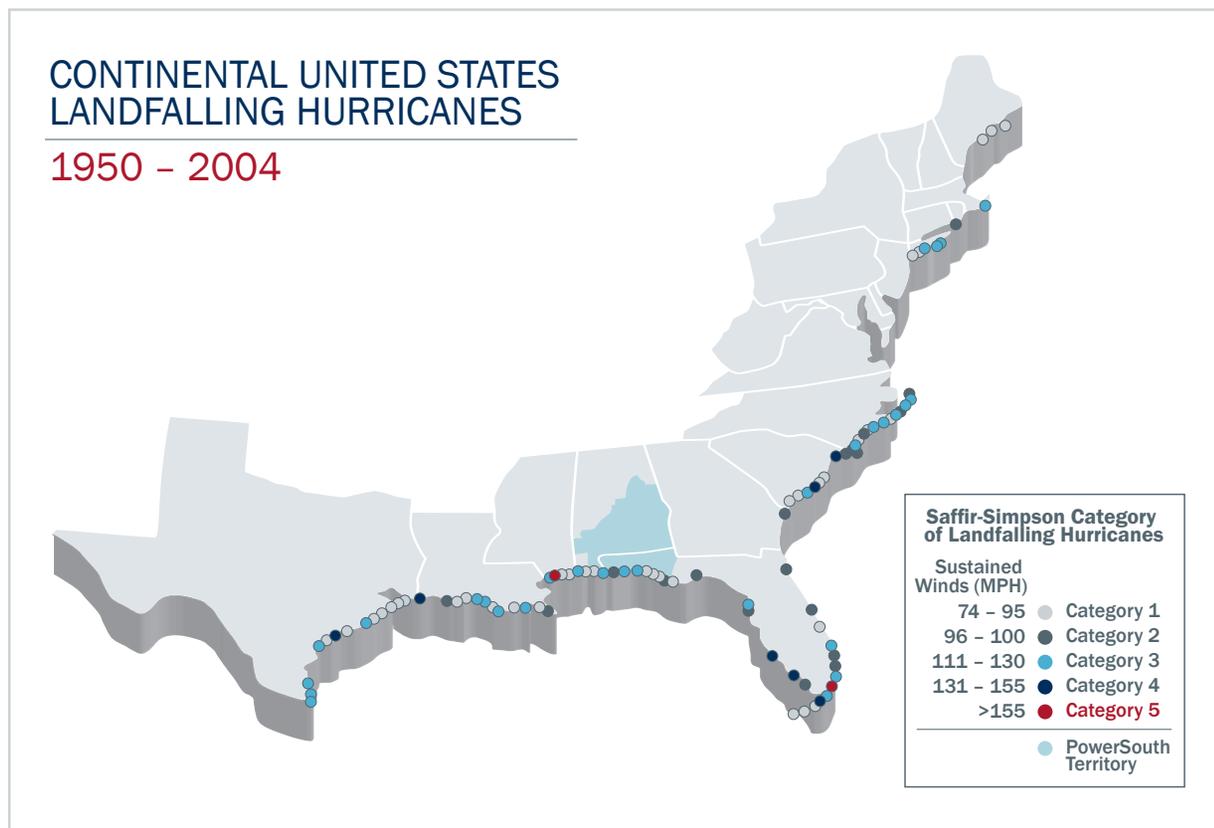
The same dispatchers must be able to quickly marshal field resources so they may respond quickly to outages, downed lines, and other system breaches.

"Human safety," said Chad Jenkins, principal engineer of telecommunications services

at PowerSouth, “is critical. I mean, we’re working with 230,000-volt lines, 115,000-volt lines, and 46,000-volt lines, so we don’t need to close breakers in on people, humans, or destroy any equipment.”

Flexibility, too, is of highest importance for a utility that must keep up with ever-changing

regulatory requirements, and a collection of complex components that would bring most IT professionals to their knees: 66 miles of fiber, 58 tower sites, 12 satellite connections, seven copper interfaces, six cellular routers, and more than 400 radios.



Time To Upgrade

Like many utilities, PowerSouth knew that becoming “unlocked” from its legacy Motorola CENTRACOM™ Elite Console system would allow it to freely choose components that would support the single-solution IP-based system that it desired.

Call recording was also an area in need of a significant upgrade. As a result of its high level of liability and scrutiny, PowerSouth is required to capture and store all of its interactions, and to catalog it for easy access and reference by a variety of interests—everyone from consumers who might dispute the details of an interaction, to government regulators who look for proof of these recordings during strict periodic Operating Review Audits.

Until mid-2010, PowerSouth used very basic recording technology that differed between their Customer Response Center and Control Center. There was no provision for redundancy or the backup control to assure reliability. Finding specific recordings to prove compliance or to handle customer complaints required major investment of time and patience. Radio communications were not yet recorded at all.



Three Vendors, One Solution

Avtec's Scout™ VoIP system was chosen as the foundation for PowerSouth's next-generation communications system—one that had to include synchronous connectivity between the primary control center in Andalusia and a backup center in Gantt, Alabama, 10 miles to the north.

Also answering the call for PowerSouth were:

- VPI, whose CAPTURE™ call recording software integrates both feeds into a single resource, eliminating the need for spanning ports or managed switches, and;
- Avaya, the incumbent telephone provider, and its 8800 CM 5.2 telephone system with AES 5.2 ACD.

“We now have a single solution,” said Jenkins. “Everything is voice over IP — both our phone system as well as our console system. The VPI system is able to capture and record communications from the Avtec Scout console as well as Avaya phone system traffic, using codecs that integrate with our server. “

In particular, Avtec's Scout offered myriad benefits that provided significant upgrades across PowerSouth's complex network, including:

- Lower cost of ownership, by leveraging the existing WAN while allowing for the termination of leased line connections
- Reconfigurable “on-the-fly” for new and expanded sites
- Greater interoperability for radios, phone lines, and advanced interfaces
- Seamless operation, even allowing for patch, mute, and other functions to work across platforms
- Dispatcher collaboration including “camp-on,” “barge-in,” and supervisory functions



Efficient Integration

An “efficient integration” approach was used as a means of conserving hardware resources for both PowerSouth and its vendors. This led to a more expedited implementation schedule. Today, all Scout audio resources are managed on an IP basis by Avtec’s VPGate™ software gateway. This direct recording integration always results in the capture of the entire voice transmission.

What’s more, VPI captures all audio files in a standard, Microsoft-native .wav format with 13.3 kps GSM compression for efficient file management. This means that recordings of both, IP radio and Avaya telephone communications at PowerSouth are saved in the same format and accessed in a unified manner, via the same interface.

Project Outcome . . .

Though exposure to weather extremes and unforeseen events will always remain a possibility for a utility like PowerSouth, threats from predictable sources—specifically, challenges by legal and regulatory interests—have been mitigated thanks to Avtec, VPI, and Avaya.

Immediately after installation of the new components, PowerSouth noted a dramatic improvement in the quality and reliability of recording telephone and radio communications at its Customer Response Center and Control Center.

Employees and executives feel reassured that they are protected from exposure to liability issues and are able to maintain the highest levels of customer satisfaction—with a measurable boost to their performance and productivity.

“Communications [between customers and] the service center must follow a strict protocol that has been developed to assure their safety,” said Jenkins. “We can now make sure the protocol is being followed. customer care managers now have tools to assure accuracy and fair resolution of customer issues or concerns.”

“The quality and value of our overall services improved and we’ve been complimented by auditors, as well,” Jenkins added.



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