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Industry Alert Issued on Electric Grid Cyberthreats as Obama Discloses Foreign Probes

Nashua, NH—February 12, 2016—The private company charged with legal authority to regulate security of the North American electric grid has issued an alert to its industry members on immediate cybersecurity threats. On the same day, President Obama disclosed that communication networks that control power grids are being probed for vulnerabilities. These moves came in the same timeframe that two experts briefed senior government officials on longstanding cyberthreats, actual grid cybersecurity incidents, and gaps in cybersecurity regulation of communication networks used for the electric grid.

On February 9, 2016, the North American Electric Reliability Corporation (NERC), a private grid regulator, issued an alert titled “Mitigating Adversarial Manipulation of Industrial Control System as Evidenced by Recent International Events.” While the NERC alert was addressed to thousands of electric utilities, the text of the alert has been withheld from the public.

Also on February 9, 2016, the Obama administration released its Cybersecurity National Action Plan. As part of showing the urgent necessity of his plan, President Obama disclosed in a Wall Street Journal op-ed that foreign probes of grid communication networks are ongoing.

A previous series of NERC alerts issued in April 2013, also withheld from the public, concerned an attack on the Metcalf substation serving critical loads in Silicon Valley and San Francisco. The full gravity of this attack became publicly known only after Jon Wellinghoff, the most senior government official responsible for grid regulation, resigned his post and contacted a reporter for the Wall Street Journal. In May 2013, a government report concluded that an attack on only nine critical grid substations could result in a national blackout lasting more than a year. In March 2014, key details of this confidential report were published in the Wall Street Journal.

In late January 2016, two experts on cybersecurity vulnerabilities of the North American electric grid, Joseph Weiss and George Cotter, briefed the commissioners of Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC) on cyberthreats and actual cybersecurity incidents in networks used to control grid substations. Joseph Weiss is author of the premier reference book on cybersecurity of industrial control systems and maintains a database of control system cybersecurity incidents within North America. George Cotter was previously Chief Scientist of the National Security Agency. Today their briefings have been publicly filed on FERC Docket RM15-14-000. The slides for the FERC briefings can be downloaded at [Exercise of FERC Authority for Cybersecurity of the North American Electric Grid](#).

The [Foundation for Resilient Societies](#) is a Nashua, New Hampshire-based nonprofit group that conducts research and education on cyber-protection of critical infrastructure. For more information or interviews with critical infrastructure experts, contact Melissa Hancock at media@resilientsocieties.org or telephone 855-688-2430, extension 2. ###