

Nadia Ely ([00:00](#)):

I'm Nadia Ely and welcome to today's discussion about Dominion Energy Strategic Underground Program which aims to increase the overall reliability of our customers electric service. We've created this podcast to showcase the program's benefits and highlight those who continuously innovate the program and the strides it's making. It features subject matter experts who share their SUP expertise and experiences. SUP project manager Ryan Garland and SUP marketing and communications coordinator Tracey Brown give us a firsthand look at the Strategic Underground Program's expansion into North Carolina. Thank you both for being here.

([00:40](#)):

Let's start with you Ryan. The decision to expand the Strategic Underground Program into North Carolina is surely an exciting one. I know we're all excited about it. Tell us about the expansion project to date and what the customer response has been like.

Ryan Garland ([01:02](#)):

Well sure, thank you Nadia for the opportunity to speak with you today. The Strategic Underground Program North Carolina is separate from the Strategic Underground Program in Virginia, but the motivation is exactly the same. As you know, this initiative targets the most outage prone overhead tap lines and looks for the best possible route to convert them underground. The conversation of SUP expanding into our North Carolina territory started back in 2020. And in the spring of 2021, I had the opportunity to start reviewing device level outage history collected between January 1, 2011 and December 31, 2020.

([01:41](#)):

In June of 2021, scoping began. We had a goal of scoping 15 miles of outage prone overhead tap lines, uh, by September. Based on geographics, the focus was on device level, projects located in Elizabeth City in the outer banks districts. In early spring of 2022, scoping started in our Ahoskie district. To date, in North Carolina 113 projects have been created. These projects total 34 and a quarter miles which is associated with 450 outages and directly affects just over 1,300 customers.

([02:20](#)):

Regarding our construction activities, our 2020 conversion goal is 11 and a quarter miles. This past April we broke ground on our first project. Due to industry wide transformer shortage, we've converted just over one miles. But with that said, we've installed roughly nine and a half miles of underground primary. As we receive equipment, we will return and finish these conversions.

([02:50](#)):

As it relates to your customer response question. Our customers have responded favorably. When visiting a site for review, I may or may not have contact with customers or the customer. If an opportunity presents itself, I explain that I'm out there making sure their GIS records in- in our system is accurate in preparation for responding if we should have an outage situation. Oftentimes the customers will engage questioning why the lines currently serving them are not underground. The Strategic Underground Program in North Carolina extends an invitation to our customers to partner with Dominion Energy to achieve a shared objective. It's this partnership that Dominion Energy and our customers value.

Nadia Ely ([03:49](#)):

Thank you Ryan. It's so exciting to hear about the progress that's already happening in North Carolina. I appreciate your time and expertise. Turning to you now, Tracey. Would you be able to walk me through some of the challenges that you've faced as the SUP expansion has begun making its way south, particularly as it relates to educating our customers about this Program that's already seen so much success in Virginia?

Tracey Brown ([04:18](#)):

Thank you, Nadia. I'm excited to tell you and everyone else about Strategic Underground in North Carolina. In case my accent doesn't give me away, I'm from northeastern North Carolina. I wanted to be a part of this program expansion before it was even developed. So the Strategic Underground Program is new to North Carolina, overhead to underground conversion and our focus on reliability is not new. I have worked with our design team in North Carolina and the project managers to undertake several large projects to convert overhead distribution lines in, storm prone areas. It's exciting that we are now expanding our reach beyond the beach communities into some of the more rural areas. And I suppose the first challenge is information.

([05:12](#)):

In portions of northeastern North Carolina, local television news comes from Tidewater television stations so property owners might have at least heard of Strategic Underground. In other portions of our service area, local news originates in areas outside of the Dominion Energy territory where they have municipal electric providers who don't have a program like Strategic Underground. Because Strategic Underground is something beyond what customers expect and something they may never have heard of, communication is crucial.

([05:45](#)):

From a communication standpoint, we were challenged with customizing our message to include North Carolina. This program is a partnership between Dominion and our customers. The way they show support of the program is to provide us the underground easements necessary to undertake the work. In turn, we spend a lot of time listening and adjusting to customer feedback to ensure that our customers are happy with the final product.

([06:10](#)):

Once we get beyond the information hurdle, North Carolina customers might have some unique scheduling concerns. In terms of scheduling construction, the North Carolina design and construction teams have always worked to minimize disruptions during tourist season in our beach communities. In some of the more rural areas we're accommodating planting and harvest. That's where some of the listening and adjusting happens.

([06:37](#)):

Strategic Underground truly is a partnership between Dominion Energy and our customers. Unfortunately, just as we're rolling out this program in North Carolina, the material delays have also presented a challenge. That's not isolated to our industry or to North Carolina. Our customers are experiencing supply chain issues in all areas of their lives. Still we are committed to this reliability improvement and to our customers. In some cases, material delays mean that we complete a phase of the project, restore the property, and wait for the equipment to return and complete the project. That means multiple property restorations to ensure we're leaving a safe site and a visually appealing property.

([07:21](#)):

We communicate at every stage so customers know what to expect. Customer satisfaction is so important and word of mouth references, good and bad, affect the success of any program. Our communication process creates positive participation between us and our customers. We have several touchpoints throughout the life cycle of a project. Each touchpoint generates a conversation and feedback.

Nadia Ely ([08:04](#)):

Tracey, thank you for pointing out those unique challenges. But for also driving home the importance of partnering with our customers and continuously communicating with them. Ryan, coming back to you, as you know, the growth process in Virginia was a slow and steady one, ramping up more and more each year. Is the plan the same for North Carolina?

Ryan Garland ([08:26](#)):

That's a good question. To date, I'm not clear on our 2023 goal for North Carolina. As we're entering the fourth quarter of 2022, I'm sure we will use this time to forecast our 2023 plan. I can say that we are well positioned and ready to release projects. Currently we have five and a half miles designed and projecting another four and a quarter miles by the end of the year. With that said, a top priority for 2023 will be to start scoping activities in our Albemarle and Roanoke Rapid districts.

Nadia Ely ([09:10](#)):

Thank you for that update. Now this last question is for both of you. What factors do you feel have played the biggest role in the successful adaptation of the program in North Carolina to date?

Tracey Brown ([09:29](#)):

Nadia, communication has been critical to- to the success of this program and I'm not talking about the distribution of information. Listening to our customers, addressing their concerns is so important. Our customers are partnering with us to make sure Strategic Underground is possible. And they're an important part of a Dominion Energy team. Teamwork has also been a critical factor in the adaptation of this program for North Carolina. Ryan has been involved in the process since the earliest discussions about expanding into North Carolina. He has sifted through all of the data to identify the tap lines that qualify. He's walked those lines and scoped the projects. I can't do those things.

([10:14](#)):

But I have worked in rural northeastern North Carolina for more than 20 years. I'm familiar with the challenges that and have found that my experience and my network federal, state, and local contacts has been helpful. Ryan and I have had so much support. Our eastern [inaudible 00:10:30] group helped to prepare the forms, our government liaison briefed local officials about the program in advance and keeps them updated on the projects. So many people are working to make North Carolina Strategic Underground a success.

Ryan Garland ([10:56](#)):

You know, Tracey I don't know that I could've said it any better. I couldn't agree more. Communication and teamwork are definitely top of mind.

Nadia Ely ([11:11](#)):

Any points Tracey or Ryan that you'd like to drive home? Anything you'd like to add? Something that you're excited about?

Ryan Garland ([11:35](#)):

Nadia, I don't know that I have anything, just excited about 2023, getting back and finishing the conversions that we started in 2022, and progressing into our Albemarle and Roanoke Rapids districts is exciting. It's very similar terrain, so excited to get out there and expand it, uh, more towards the central part of North Carolina.

Tracey Brown ([12:18](#)):

I want to give a specific example, Nadia. I know that we've had several customers that we approached on one project and they were so impressed by the program that they suggested they had other properties that they would like to be considered for the program. I think we've been very well received in North Carolina.

Nadia Ely ([12:45](#)):

That's great news Tracey and Ryan, both about the customer feedback and the expansion and growth that we're hoping to see in 2023. I'd like to thank Tracey Brown and Ryan Garland for their expertise and participation. Learn more about the Strategic Underground Program at dominionenergy.com/underground. Thanks for listening and be on the lookout for future episodes. I'm Nadia Ely.