

Washington man arrested, charged in connection with 2022 attacks on Oregon electrical grid

Conrad Wilson

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A Washington man now faces federal charges for intentionally damaging an electrical substation in Clackamas County in 2022.

Nathaniel Cheney was arrested April 2, after he was indicted March 12 on two counts of damage to an energy facility. Cheney, 30, is a resident of Centralia, Washington, according to a spokesperson for the U.S. Department of Justice.

According to charging documents, Cheney “knowingly and willfully damaged” the Sunnyside Substation in Clackamas on Nov. 28, 2022 and “attempted to cause a significant interruption and impairment of the function of the energy facility.” He was released after appearing in federal court in Portland on Wednesday, according to court records.



Bonneville Power Administration’s Oregon City Substation in Oregon City, Jan. 5, 2023.

Kristyna Wentz-Graff / OPB

The indictment includes a second name that’s redacted. That person is charged with damaging the Ostrander Substation in Oregon City on Nov. 24. According to the federal charging document the attack caused more than \$100,000 in damage.

The attacks in 2022 were part of a national series of attempted disruptions to the electrical grid with possible ties to extremist groups.

At the time, Kenneth Worstell, a security specialist with the U.S. Department of Energy's Bonneville Power Administration, told the Oregon law enforcement agencies that the Ostrander Substation "was targeted by two intruders who cut into the fence and used firearms to shoot up and disable numerous pieces of equipment and cause significant damage."

In emails, Worstell wrote that there were also several recent attacks on substations in Washington state. He stated that attackers had set fires and short circuited electrical systems through firearms and chains.

"There has been a significant uptick in incidents of break-ins related to copper and tool theft, but now we are dealing with quickly escalating incidents of sabotage," Worstell advised law enforcement agencies in Washington, Multnomah and Clackamas counties. "Online extremist groups across the political spectrum are not only calling for attacking these types of sites, but also spelling out in detail how to do it."

The Pacific Northwest's uptick in attacks on the electrical grid coincided with an attack on two substations in North Carolina that knocked out electricity for days to some 40,000 people in late 2022. On Feb. 6, 2023, the U.S. Department of Justice charged the leader of a neo-Nazi group with conspiring to destroy an energy facility in Maryland. He was motivated by his racist and violent views, according to federal prosecutors.

Law enforcement has not suggested or provided evidence that any of the cases are directly linked, however. Last year, two men in Washington state pleaded guilty to attacking four substations on Christmas Day 2022, though federal prosecutors say they were attempting to rob businesses rather than further political agendas.

Investigators have not outlined a motive for the attacks on substations in Oregon.

According to a Nov. 22, 2022, memo obtained by OPB and KUOW, the FBI warned of an increase in "threats to electrical infrastructure" from what it describes as "racially or ethnically motivated violent extremists." That includes not only white supremacist groups, but also people attempting to sow chaos as a way to encourage domestic conflicts.

"The individuals of concern believe that an attack on electrical infrastructure will contribute to their ideological goal of causing societal collapse and a subsequent race war in the United States," the memo states.

Weeks later, a second bulletin sent by the FBI's Portland field office reported information about specific attacks carried out in Oregon and Washington. It conveyed similar information as Worstell's early emails to law enforcement.

"No theft was reported in either case, making it apparent that the intent was likely to disable electrical systems and not for monetary profit," the document stated.

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