



CASE STUDY

The largest Utility Provider in Nevada Transforms Compliance Management and Streamlines NERC Audit Preparation with AssurX





Overview

After a series of audit findings, this western US utility company recognized they needed a more reliable system for managing NERC compliance, specifically in areas such as change management and access management. By deploying AssurX NERC compliance software, the organization now has complete visibility into their compliance processes, minimizing opportunities for human error and reducing compliance risk overall.

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Director of NERC Compliance

THE COMPANY

As the largest Utility Provider in Nevada, they provide energy services to nearly 1.3 million electric customers across the state and more than 50 million tourists annually, with a service area that includes Las Vegas, Reno, Henderson and Elko. The company also provides natural gas to customers in Reno and is involved in numerous renewable projects throughout Nevada.

With multiple facilities spread across the state, maintaining compliance with NERC standards meant dealing with a complex web of requirements and evidence. However, legacy tools and processes made compliance increasingly challenging, particularly for standards like CIP-007 and CIP-010.

LEGACY SYSTEM LEADS TO CIP COMPLIANCE GAPS

For years, the utility provider managed its CIP compliance program using a SharePoint system originally implemented as a project tool when CIP v5 first came into effect. Trying to utilize the system as a program management tool, however, created several issues, ultimately leading to a number of noncompliance items on their NERC audit.

“The system’s structure made everything very difficult to track,” says the Director of NERC Compliance. “We had no consolidated view of our data, and instead had to go to numerous different areas to get that data. The problem was that this created multiple potential places where human error could occur. On top of that, the inherent complexity of CIP compliance was overwhelming the system. The database for the SharePoint site wasn’t able to handle the number of transactions that occur for all of the assets that we have.”



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Two areas where the organization recognized they needed automation was around access management and change management to support stronger compliance with CIP-007 and CIP-010, respectively.

BRINGING THE RIGHT SOLUTION AND THE RIGHT TEAM TOGETHER

Recognizing that their SharePoint system simply wasn’t sufficient to ensure NERC CIP compliance, this western US utility provider set out to find an automated system that would make it simpler to track compliance and minimize opportunities for human error.

The utility looked at a number of different solutions, ultimately deciding on AssurX in late 2020. Implementing the software during the pandemic presented its own set of challenges, and the utility also quickly realized internal resources with SQL knowledge would be necessary to stand up the solution.

“You really need a system administrator with a strong understanding of database structures and SQL to utilize all of the automation in AssurX,” says the Manager of NERC CIP Compliance.

They started their implementation by deploying AssurX Document Management to centralize requirements and evidence and to support document workflows. After that solution was up and running the utility focused next on implementing AssurX’s Patch Management and Change Management solutions.

“Part of our mitigation for our WECC audit findings was to implement a different tool than what we had been using, particularly for CIP-007 and CIP-010,” the Director of NERC Compliance says.

The Utility integrated AssurX with several other enterprise applications, including their HR Active Directory, Tripwire and FoxGuard. While AssurX Professional Services helped them get integrated quickly, honing the data correctly was a longer process.

“You can get the data uploaded, but trying to develop the database structure in the way you need it and how you display data takes time,” he says.

In terms of what they recommend to other prospective customers, it’s all about having the right team.

“You can’t just put something in place and walk away,” the Director of NERC Compliance says. “Having people that can test and retest the system is essential.”

While the implementation process wasn’t without its bumps, the AssurX team was always responsive and willing to help.



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The Manager of NERC CIP Compliance stated “All of the professional services people we worked with were great. They were really helpful especially in giving us ideas on how to improve.”

NEW EFFICIENCIES LEAD TO BIG TIME SAVINGS

The utility provider saw big improvements in document management from the very beginning. However, the most remarkable change happened when they went live with access management.

“We had been using a very antiquated legacy product that had zero support, so having the integration with HR and getting notices of termination put into automated workflows was an immediate improvement,” says the Director.

Later that year, they went live with AssurX Change Management, which has had huge efficiency impacts on the change advisory board (CAB) process. Where SMEs once had to enter testing information in multiple places, AssurX now provides a one-stop shop for everything related to patches and testing.

“Our SMEs have created a CAB dashboard where every piece of information we need related to patch management can be found in one place,” the director says. The team can see what’s coming up, what’s almost due, and workflows in progress from one centralized view.

“One of our SMEs says that it used to take days to prepare for a CAB meeting, but now it can be done in just a couple of hours.”

When questions come up, they can immediately access the ticket in AssurX to see exactly where it is in the workflow—and any bottlenecks holding the process back. The process has also improved accountability of SMEs for getting their tickets approved.

LEVERAGING ASSURX FOR PROACTIVE AUDIT READINESS

Before implementing AssurX, preparing for a NERC audit meant merging data from separate ticketing and evidence tracking systems, making sure all the data matched. Now, with AssurX’s query tool, the team can immediately pull up any information requested without having to go to multiple places.

“If an auditor asks to see all of the patches installed on an asset over a given timeframe, I can run that query and export all of the evidence into an Excel file,” the Director says.

The utility has even built queries in AssurX linked to specific sections of NERC’s evidence request tool (ERT) that are likely to come up during audits, such as access management. The NERC CIP Compliance team has created queries that list all terminated employees and show their access was revoked within the required time period, making it simple to demonstrate compliance with CIP-007.



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DRIVING VISIBILITY, PRODUCTIVITY AND ACCOUNTABILITY IN THE PROCESS

With AssurX, they now have complete visibility into their NERC compliance process, which has been transformational in terms of accountability.

“As a leader, I can see where we are at any given time, for example, if we’re getting close to missing any deadlines,” says the director.

She adds that the team has also ramped up productivity since deploying AssurX, despite some initial pushback from SMEs on newly implemented workflows.

The SMEs adopted the new tool quickly, and leaders of the SMEs are pleased because they can see what’s going on as well. “Having that visibility has really helped improve our compliance posture and reduce our audit risk.”

FUTURE PLANS WITH ASSURX

Moving forward, the utility is working to integrate AssurX with the organization’s learning management system, with plans for numerous future integrations with additional asset databases.

“One of the biggest benefits we’ve found with the AssurX solution is the ability to gather, share and react to information from other systems,” says the Director. “It’s very powerful.”

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With decades of expertise built into our extensive quality management and regulatory compliance software, the AssurX Quality Management Software Platform helps companies maintain quality and compliance standards, streamline workflows, and better manage any enterprise. Our configurable software and understanding of users’ needs produce a unique system that easily adapts and scales as a customers’ business evolves. AssurX is an ideal partner for regulated companies looking for better operational control and efficiency while staying compliant. [Learn more.](#)

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