

# Ice storm leaves half million without power in Central US

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Another bout of severe winter weather is expected to hit the US Central Plain states, where more than a half million residents remain without power after a powerful ice storm earlier in the week. Sunday and Monday's ice storms hit Oklahoma, Missouri, Kansas, Nebraska and Illinois and have been blamed for at least two-dozen deaths.

In Oklahoma, the hardest hit state, utility companies say it will take a week to 10 days before power is restored to more than 400,000 households and businesses. Officials said it was the worst power outage in the history of the state, without one of every three residents in the state of 3.6 million people without electricity.

Power lines snapped under the weight of ice and falling tree branches. Other utilities with significant outages included Westar Energy Inc. with 76,000 in Kansas, Aquila Inc. with about 47,000 in Missouri, Empire District Electric Co. with about 33,000 in Missouri and Kansas and Alliant Energy Corp with about 25,000 in Iowa, according to Reuters news service.

Large numbers of people in Oklahoma's two largest cities—Oklahoma City and Tulsa—are facing freezing temperatures and darkness. Local hotels, which have emergency generators, are already overbooked. Oklahoma City Mayor Mick Cornett urged residents who had electricity to share it with people who do not.

The fire departments in Oklahoma and Tulsa have responded to more than 100 fires and hundreds of complaints of downed power lines. Three people were killed in an early morning house fire Wednesday in an Oklahoma City home without power. Investigators are trying to determine if the fire was caused by a makeshift effort to heat or light the home. In another tragedy in the city a 19-year-old Colombian immigrant

died of carbon monoxide poisoning after a power generator was placed inside her home.

On Monday President Bush signed a federal emergency disaster declaration after the state submitted its request for federal aid on Monday. The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) has sent 50 generators to the state for hospitals, water treatment plants and emergency shelters and 50 more are reportedly on the way. Word of the arrival of the generators sparked a wave of calls from residents to 911 emergency operators requesting power-generating equipment for their homes. FEMA authorities announced that the generators are industrial size and not for residential use.

Adding insult to injury power companies have announced that residents would be responsible to repair damage to electric meters on their homes before the utility companies would restore electricity. The cost would be anywhere from \$200 to \$2,000, local news stations reported.

At the same time there have been stories of self-sacrifice and solidarity among working people. According to the CBS affiliate KWTW in Oklahoma City, "Crews of linemen are coming in from New Mexico, Louisiana, and Texas, returning the favor after crews here went down from Louisiana and Mississippi after Hurricane Rita and Katrina."

As in most natural disasters there is a manmade component to the catastrophe. Those hardest hit are working people and the impoverished whose poor housing conditions leave them most vulnerable to harsh elements.

Oklahoma was hit with a devastating ice storm in 2002 and again in January of this year. Despite ample warnings utility companies have not invested in upgrading the power infrastructure to protect power

lines from severe weather.

This was acknowledged in the comments of the chairman of the Oklahoma Corporation Commission, the public body that regulates the state's utility companies. Chairman Jeff Cloud said, "We have had two storms of the century already this calendar year. Everybody is busy by doing what they need to do, and they are doing a great job in extremely difficult conditions.

"But we cannot be the only state with above-ground lines that faces ice storms, so we are going to get together and start comparing notes about how other states do this.

"This is about starting a discussion and doing some serious analysis about what the costs are, and what the positives are. One question we definitely will ask is whether burying lines would help us in storms like we are experiencing now."

Cloud said he has friends in areas where lines are buried who have been only marginally inconvenienced by this storm, and others in historic areas of the city who suffered through outages lasting 24 hours and longer.

Coincidentally, the Engineering Energy Laboratory at Oklahoma State University has issued warnings about dangers of the state and nation's declining power infrastructure. A previously published article on the department's web site warned, "To see how aging infrastructure compounds disaster, Oklahomans need only to recall the ice storm of January 2002 when almost 250,000 homes and businesses lost power, some for more than 22 days. Texas repair crews in the state to help restore hundreds of miles of downed power lines said thousands of the snapped poles should have been replaced years earlier, having stood in place long past their recommended use.

"Dr. Rama Ramakumar, director of OSU's Engineering Energy Laboratory, says electric power system reliability will not improve until problems with the aging infrastructure are seriously addressed. He says nearly 50 percent of some grid systems have been in place 50 years and others for 100 years. And the growth of regional power markets following industry deregulation has led to an uneasy cooperation between electric utility providers who, while willing to share the infrastructure, are less willing to share in grid maintenance and modernization."



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