

US: Power outages persist throughout Kentucky

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5 February 2009

A week after being hit by an ice storm and bitterly cold weather, hundreds of thousands of households in the south central US remain without power and heat. Damage is most widespread in Kentucky, which was declared a federal disaster area last week.

As of Monday, the storm and its aftermath had contributed to at least 57 deaths throughout the country. Twenty-four of these fatalities have been in Kentucky, with at least 16 of these attributed to carbon monoxide poisoning from portable gas generators and kerosene heaters.

In the immediate aftermath of the storm, nearly 1.7 million people were without power, including nearly 700,000 homes and businesses in Kentucky alone—a third of the state's power customers.

Although company utility crews have been continuously working to repair lines, more than 208,000 remain without power, including tens of thousands in the city of Louisville. The state's Public Service Commission chair David Armstrong, in a statement issued Wednesday, said, "The extent of damage is unprecedented, particularly to the electric transmission lines that are the backbone of the system. Completing repairs in the working conditions following the storm is going to be a difficult and time-consuming process."

Most of the outages are concentrated in the western part of the state, serviced by utility company Louisville Gas & Electric. Other broad areas left without power in the central part of the state are serviced by Kentucky Utilities. Both companies are owned by the energy corporation E.ON U.S., which has said it may take a week to 10 days to restore power.

The Public Service Commission has not given a precise estimate of the many households depending on

municipal utilities whose power and heat was knocked out in more remote areas of Kentucky. However, a spokesman for the state's rural electric cooperatives told Reuters news service Tuesday that it could be weeks before power was restored.

The region is experiencing unseasonably cold weather and heavy snowfall. In fact, the present cold spell is 20 to 30 degrees below average for early February. Many thousands of working class families live in homes or trailers that are simply not insulated and equipped to comfortably weather severe cold. With temperatures plunging again into single digits this week, thousands of families have been forced to leave their homes.

State officials said Tuesday that the number of residents seeking out emergency assistance continued to rise. A spokesman for the State Division of Emergency Management told the Associated Press that as of Tuesday, there were about 7,844 people staying at shelters, an increase of more than 1,400 people over the past few days. At the same time, the number of operable shelters has dropped from 210 to only 135 statewide.

The state, long battling budget shortfalls, high unemployment and pervasive poverty, has appealed for federal disaster relief funds. On February 2, Democrat Governor Steve Beshear, who estimated damage and the cost of repairs at \$45 million, requested that the Obama administration declare the state a major disaster area and thereby take on the cost of initial rescue efforts at the federal level. Initially, the state requested only some \$5 million to help defray the costs of providing generators and bottled water to communities.

Currently Kentucky faces a budget shortfall of some \$460 million. Beshear appealed to President Obama for the additional \$40 million to compensate for damage to

the state's agricultural sector and to help pay the salaries for 4,600 Kentucky National Guard troops who have been deployed in door-to-door rescue operations.

Louisville faces a particularly tight budget for its relief and repair efforts. On Monday, Mayor Jerry Abramson said the city had very little in the way of federal funds.

Louisville had only received \$1.4 million of the \$3.4 million it had requested for major wind damage sustained in September from the remnants of Hurricane Ike. Abramson told the press that he would again request funds, but that it would be weeks before a damage estimate could be determined. In the meantime, residents were told to remove debris themselves and that the city would retrieve it later in the month.

The Obama administration, aware of the frustration among the population over botched FEMA operations during multiple hurricanes and floods during Bush's presidency, has made some play of the disaster to showcase its supposedly efficient federal response. One cannot help contrasting the meager scale and pace of disaster relief to the Obama administration's other "rescue" plan. In comparison to the multiple hundred-billion-dollar handouts to the financial sector, the response to the pleas of state-level officials for emergency relief—generators, meals-ready-to-eat—assumes an absurdly small dimension.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to a number of Kentuckians about the situation. Jana, an elementary school teacher in eastern Bath County, told the WSWS that she knew many in her community who lost their power during the storm. "Many went to other family members who had power. In this area, I think it was due to the fact that ice was very heavy," pulling down wires and breaking trees. "People who reside in more rural areas of the county just got their power back on Sunday."

Schools around the state have been forced to close for the week. Jana said, "School is back in session; we went one day since the storm, but now due to the recent snow, we are out again. But students are eager to come back because of the meals they receive at school."

Gabe, a state worker in Frankfurt, told the WSWS that as of Tuesday several hundred were without power in the capital. "In the *Lexington Herald* they said it's mostly the old and poor who are still without power," he said. "If that is true that is very sad."

Gabe noted that two of his co-workers had been without electricity since January 28, but had been told that it would be another 10 days before the lines would be repaired. "They both have fireplaces, but it's not heating the rest of the house," he said, "So people at work have been letting those without use any kerosene heater they may have."

"I personally have not seen the first bucket truck that would restore power since this storm happened, not one," he said. "Neighborhoods are like war zones. Trees down everywhere. Property owners are responsible for their own clean up. Pick-up is to be scheduled at a later date—not sure when that will happen. In the meantime, piles of branches and trees lay next to the roads."

Gabe described how people searched in vain for generators, while retailers refused to buy a large shipment to ease demand. Major home improvement retailer Lowe's was reportedly ordering only 10 generators at a time. "They don't want to order more than that and be sitting on them if they didn't sell them all—Burns me up thinking about that!"

He added, "Seems as though our governor has been on all the major networks talking about the help we need, but I don't think or feel it is moving fast enough. Tonight's temp is 12 degrees with a -1 wind chill."



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