Power outages, flooding continue in wake of Hurricane Irene

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The death toll from Hurricane Irene climbed to 46 on Thursday as residents in Vermont and New Jersey continued to battle serious flooding, and significant power outages continued throughout the Northeast US.

Since Hurricane Irene hit North Carolina last Saturday and headed up the Eastern Seaboard as a tropical storm, she has left in her wake a trail of destruction that has exposed the deplorable state of the US infrastructure. As in other such disasters, government authorities are unprepared to meet the needs of people that have fallen victim.

Of the estimated 5.5 million homes and businesses that lost electricity as a result of the storm, one fifth of these—1.1 million—were still without power as of Thursday morning, according to the U.S. Department of Energy. Worst affected were Connecticut, with 16 percent of customers without power, and Rhode Island, where 14 percent were still waiting for it to be restored.

The nation's electric grid, with power lines predominantly above ground, is prone to blackouts. Homes often lose power due to thunderstorms or blizzards, let alone major storms. While authorities are well aware that major hurricanes and tornadoes will sooner or later strike, nothing is done to prepare for them because the power grid is controlled by a network of private energy conglomerates. Neither the energy giants nor the government has any interest in spending the money required to upgrade the system to provide reliable delivery of electricity—a basic necessity—to the population.

In the wake of Irene, anger is growing in areas where power has still not been restored days later. In Ridgefield, Connecticut, 60 percent of customers, some 18,000 households, are still blacked out. Police have been deployed to guard crews from Connecticut Light & Power, who are working to restore power, from angry residents.

As in other such natural disasters, in the aftermath of Irene working class families and the poor are the last to receive assistance. Communities are forced to rely on donations from charity organizations and volunteers, as well as support from family, friends and total strangers, which is in plentiful supply in the absence of government aid.

In Pawtucket, Rhode Island, Christine Lachapelle told the Associated Press Thursday that three days after tropical storm Irene she still had no power. She said she was cooking what food she had on an outside grill to feed people in her neighborhood. AP wrote that on Wednesday "she was at a Red Cross station to get as many water bottles as she could carry for her neighbors, many of whom are poor, with little money, no cars and limited English."

"There's no help for these people," Christine said. "There's no water, no electricity. I had a woman knocking on my door this morning asking if I had water. It's really getting worse." Many households, particularly in rural areas, need electricity to pump water from wells.

Nearly a week after Irene first made landfall, the state of Vermont remains particularly hard hit. Some 5,000 homes and businesses are still experiencing power outages. Thirteen towns remained cut off by floodwaters, after the tropical storm washed out hundreds of key roads and bridges.

The National Guard began airlifts of food and water to these areas on Tuesday. In scenes more familiar to humanitarian disasters in third-world nations, helicopters dropped boxes of ready to eat meals, bottled water, medicine and other supplies into these isolated communities.

Eight helicopters from the Illinois National Guard had to be flown in to assist in the relief effort because Vermont's own Black Hawk helicopters and 55 National Guard troops have been stationed in Iraq as part of the US occupation force. The helicopters are on their way back to Vermont, but will not be cleared for service for about a month as they need to undergo an extensive maintenance check to remove desert sand and grit from their machinery.

About 50 trucks from the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) arrived Tuesday and Wednesday loaded with water, snack packs and self-contained meals for distribution throughout the ravaged region. In addition to the isolated Vermont towns, 27 others needed to be rushed supplies by a fleet of flatbed trucks, Humvees and highwater

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vehicles.

In Vermont as well as areas of upstate New York, New Jersey and North Carolina, farms have been devastated by Irene, whose rains and high winds killed livestock, submerged crops, and in some cases washed away barns and equipment. The storm came at a critical time as many crops were being harvested.

New York Governor Andrew Cuomo estimated agricultural losses for the state at $45 million, and that figure is expected to rise. The president of a North Carolina produce sales group told the *Packer*, "I don't know if there will be anything left" of produce in the state.

Statewide farming losses in Vermont are difficult to tally due to the cutoff of roads and continued flooding. Westminster farmer Cory Walker, who runs Guerilla Grown Produce, told the *Brattleboro Reformer*, "We lost over 50 percent of our crops. All of our winter crops are gone. There are over five acres of vegetables that are lost."

Another Vermont farmer, Paul Dutton of Newfane, estimates his Dutton Berry Farm sustained about $75,000 worth of damage. At its worst, about 75 percent of his fields were flooded, he told the *Reformer*. Lost crops included chrysanthemums, fruit trees, watermelons, cantaloupe and squash.

At least a dozen Vermont dairy farms reported that their products could not be picked up because vehicles were unable to make it to their operations. Some have been forced to dump milk into fields to keep tanks from overflowing.

WNYC in New York City spoke with Michael Hurwitz, director of the group that runs New York City farmers markets, who said, "This could not have happened at a worse time of the year … It's a triple-whammy. This is the busiest time of the year at market. This is when the bulk of harvest is in. The fall is when our farmers earn their yearly income. It's also … a time of year when you can't really replant what was lost."

These small farmers, many of whose farms have been in the family for generations, will likely see little government assistance. The federally subsidized group insurance system mainly protects agribusiness, particularly large growers of crops such as corn, soy and cotton.

While farmers of "specialty crops" like fruits and vegetables can sometimes obtain this coverage, the process for doing so is complex and prohibitively expensive and is also restricted to certain areas of the country. In the Northeast, where the farming damage from Irene is centered, the insurance is not even available, with the possible exception of coverage for apple orchards.

In addition to rural farming communities in Vermont and upstate New York, Paterson, New Jersey and surrounding towns in the north of the state continue to feel the impact of Irene. Paterson is suffering the highest floodwaters in over a century, as entire blocks lie underwater.

Thousands of city residents remained in shelters Thursday after being evacuated from their homes. President Barack Obama plans to visit Paterson on Sunday, his first trip to any of the areas ravaged by the hurricane.

Once a thriving textile manufacturing city, Paterson is now plagued by poverty and unemployment. The damage caused by the hurricane will further devastate the city's economy, already hard hit by the recession. Mayor Jeffery Jones told the *New York Times*, "We're a city that needs financial help from the state, and any expense that we have to incur now only straps us for other services like parks and road repairs."

As the fallout from Hurricane Irene intensified, the National Hurricane Center in Miami pointed to two new storms with the potential of hitting the US. Tropical storm Katia in the eastern Atlantic was upgraded to a Category 1 hurricane Thursday. The center noted on its web site that "Katia could become a major hurricane this weekend," while it was too soon to predict whether the storm would make landfall.

Also of concern is a low-pressure area in the Gulf of Mexico that the center gave a 70 percent chance of becoming a tropical cyclone over the next few days. Worst-case scenario, this storm could cause sizeable flooding and damage throughout the Gulf region, the same area hit by Hurricane Katrina six years ago. Meteorologists said it had the potential of pounding an area from the Florida panhandle to the Texas coast with 10 to 20 inches of rain.

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