

Hundreds of thousands without power in wake of Northeast US storm

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Nearly a week after an unusually early snowstorm hit the Northeast US, an estimated half million electric customers remained without power as of Friday. The storm dropped wet, heavy snow from Pennsylvania through northern New England on October 28-29, downing power lines weighted with snow-covered leaves and leaving many roads impassable. Some 2.7 million residents and businesses were without power at the height of the electric outages.

At least 25 deaths have been blamed on the storm, the majority from carbon monoxide poisoning as residents without power attempt to keep warm by running gasoline-powered generators and charcoal grills without adequate ventilation. Other fatalities have been attributed to hypothermia, house fires, traffic accidents, and electrocution from downed power lines.

States of emergency have been declared in Connecticut, Massachusetts and New Hampshire, where more than three feet of snow dropped in some areas. The disaster takes place just two months after Tropical Storm Irene, which wreaked havoc in many of the same areas, knocking out power to hundreds of thousands.

The slow response of private utilities in restoring power following the recent storm has provoked the anger of residents and local government, and exposed the woefully inadequate state of the US infrastructure, particularly the electricity grid. In particular, for-profit power companies will not invest the funds required to bury power lines, which would go a long way toward preventing widespread outages in the first place, let alone the prolonged repair periods hampered by inadequate resources and lack of serious preparation.

In Connecticut, one of the hardest hit states, more than 300,000 electric customers remained without

power as of Friday, down from a high of some 800,000. There have been eight storm-related deaths reported, including four from carbon monoxide poisoning; 276 people have been treated for carbon monoxide poisoning statewide. A 41-year-old East Hartford woman was found dead after apparently using a charcoal stove to heat her bedroom.

As in other states, recovery efforts have been slowed by an inadequate response by the private utility company, in this case Connecticut Light and Power. While CL&P has pledged to restore power to 99 percent of customers by Sunday, local authorities and residents are skeptical of this promise after days in which entire towns have remained in the dark, and many roads remain blocked by downed wires.

Recovery is at a virtual standstill in many areas because local municipal workers deployed to remove downed wires and trees must wait for CL&P crews with the expertise to deal with live electrical wires. Communities already struggling with budget deficits in some cases are paying overtime for municipal workers to wait for CL&P crews to arrive on the scene.

In South Windsor, a town hard hit by the storm, the fire department issued a press release warning that people “could die in fires and homes could burn to the ground” if CL&P did not deal with the downed wires. The statement added, “In the last 24 hours, CL&P has taken no action to correct this critical situation.... We now feel it necessary to publicly state that we intend to hold the President and Board of Directors of CL&P responsible for any fire deaths, injuries, or property damage in those portions of town that remain inaccessible.”

In nearby Avon, 80 percent of customers were still without power as of Friday morning. Town Manager Brandon Robertson told the *Hartford Courant*, “It’s

entirely unacceptable.... Since Sunday, we have been asking for crews to keep our public works crews working. We've wasted 80 to 100 hours of our crews' time. We are mad.... It's pretty unexplainable why they've had this area go with hardly any restoration for six days."

In Simsbury, where few repair CL&P crews have been sighted, desperate residents have taken the dangerous decision to begin removing trees, debris and downed wires on their own. "Folks are going out there and cutting wires," Simsbury First Selectman Mary Glassman told the *Courant*. "That's not town crews. They're becoming vigilante tree cutters."

Connecticut State Attorney General George Jepsen on Thursday called on the Public Utilities Regulatory Authority to carrying out an investigation into CL&P's handing of the storm and subsequent blackout. Authorities are also concerned that the private utility will attempt to pass on the costs of repairs and cleanup to customers in the form of rate hikes.

In Massachusetts, more than 85,000 homes and businesses remained without power as of Friday morning, mostly National Grid and Western Massachusetts Electric customers. This was down from a high of 670,000 earlier in the week. At least six deaths have been linked to the storm and its aftermath, including four deaths from carbon monoxide poisoning. One person was electrocuted from a downed power line, and another died in a house fire.

On Thursday morning, an elderly woman was found dead in her unheated home in North Brookfield, an apparent victim of hypothermia. According to the Worcester County District Attorney, Dorothy Hall, 86, was found wrapped in a blanket in a rocking chair by her son, a retired firefighter, who also lived in the home. They had been without heat since power was knocked out by the storm last Saturday evening.

As in Connecticut, Massachusetts' attorney general, Martha Coakley, said she intends to launch an investigation into the response of utility companies to recent storms that have caused widespread power outages. As with other disasters, however, such probes are likely to yield minimal results. An investigation into a December 2010 storm led to a \$2 million settlement with National Grid, a slap on the wrist for a company with \$3.4 billion in profits in 2010, up more than 50 percent over 2009.

As the region braced Friday for a cold blast of weekend weather, thousands remained without power in other Northeast states:

- Six thousand were still in the dark in New Hampshire.
- In New Jersey, 65,000 were still without power. Eight storm-related deaths were reported, including three killed in house fires, two dead after being hit by falling branches, and three in motor vehicle accidents.
- About 6,000 remained without power in New York.
- Some 19,000 customers in Pennsylvania still had no power; at least eight deaths have been attributed to the storm.



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