Two dead, over half a million without power from US Mid-Atlantic storms

Nick Barrickman
15 June 2013

A severe storm system moved through the Mid-Atlantic states Thursday morning and afternoon, leaving at least two people dead and over 500,000 without power. The storms left a trail of uprooted trees, smashed homes and decimated infrastructure in its wake. Further storms are expected throughout the region over the weekend.

Wind and lightning caused by the storms are said to have led to fatalities and injuries throughout the region. A four year-old boy in Richmond, Virginia was pronounced dead on the scene when an uprooted poplar tree came crashing down on him and his father at a local park. The boy's father was taken to the hospital for non-life threatening injuries.

A fire sparked by lightning is suspected to have caused the death of a man in Western Pennsylvania. A 19 year-old woman 20 miles north of Baltimore was struck by lightning while feeding animals at the Plumpton Park Zoo in Rising Sun, Maryland. She was taken to a local hospital after being resuscitated by a co-worker.

The storms hit heaviest in the Baltimore/Washington metropolitan area, which recorded over 300,000 power outages at homes and businesses. In North Carolina, the Piedmont region reported more than 157,000 outages while Georgia saw over 160,000.

Flights were delayed or cancelled throughout the Eastern Seaboard for the majority of the day. In Maryland, commuters at Baltimore-Washington International Airport were directed to seek shelter in bathrooms and at low points in the terminal while the storm passed.

Robert Hausman of Rockville, Maryland told the *Washington Post* that from his 17th floor office building "[y]ou could see the Tysons Corner buildings, and then you saw this black cloud and Tysons disappeared under the cloud." He added, "everything was gone. You could not see out the window."

At least one tornado was spotted in the suburbs of Washington DC. Zita Bowley, 85, was reported to have heard a "magnificent crash" as an uprooted poplar tree collided with the back of her home. "I thought that was it. … It is as if the ground shifted beneath my feet, and in a way it has," she told the *Washington Post*. Ms. Bowly's home was left uninhabitable.

The storms were part of a fast-moving system that earlier in the week had caused severe wind damage to parts of Chicago and its outlying suburbs.

The storm drew comparison to last year's Mid-Atlantic and Midwest derecho, one of the most deadly thunderstorm systems in US history, which left 22 dead and millions without power and caused over $7 billion in damages.

Like last year's derecho, this latest round of storms have exposed the gap between the growing occurrence of extreme weather in the US and the falling preparedness of authorities, local and national, to deal with such instances.

Climate scientists have observed increased levels of extreme weather in recent years, which many have tied to global warming. "We're seeing an increase in the extreme events and increase in damage associated with them as we've become more vulnerable," said Louis Uccellini, Director of the National Weather Service, at a conference of the New York Institute of Technology this week.

"There's been about a 75 percent increase in heaviest rain events in the northeast in the last 50 years, so these downpours we're having are increasing significantly," added Cynthia E. Rosenzweig, a senior research scientist at the NASA Goddard Institute for Space Studies, who also attended the conference.

© World Socialist Web Site

According to research conducted by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), last year was the hottest year on record, with the warmest spring, second warmest summer, fourth warmest winter and an above-average autumn. That year, the average temperature was 55.3 degrees Fahrenheit, one degree more than the previous hottest year on record, 1998.

The growth in extreme weather has paralleled the increasing decrepitude of the US power infrastructure. According to figures reported earlier this year by the Associated Press, power outages have increased by 15 percent in the past decade, with an average of 500,000 Americans losing electricity in a given day.

In the Washington DC area, the majority of outages fell upon customers of the regional utility giant Pepco. Despite the company's unpreparedness for this and other storms, the utility giant has constantly sought rate hikes for its customers in the DC area, including a $52 million increase last winter. The company's CEO, Joe Rigby, has seen his annual compensation grow to over $7 million in 2011, even while Pepco paid no federal or state income taxes from 2008 to 2010.

The author also recommends:

Pepco cuts exacerbate Washington, DC power outages
[6 July 2012]

US death toll rises from heat wave and power outages
[4 July 2012]

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site