

Tens of thousands in southwest Louisiana remain without power two weeks after Hurricane Laura

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More than two weeks since Hurricane Laura, the strongest hurricane to hit Louisiana since the antebellum era, made landfall, the picture of the social and ecological crisis wrought in its wake is coming into focus.

With the total economic cost of recovery expected to be in the tens of billions of dollars, over 100,000 homes and businesses are still without electricity and access to clean water; over 10,000 evacuees are still scattered throughout the area; and with Tropical Storm Sally on its way to Louisiana, the impact of the storm has exposed the underlying social disaster in the state 15 years after the devastation of Hurricane Katrina.

As of this writing, the death toll in Louisiana stands at 28, and eight in Texas. In Louisiana, nine deaths were caused by carbon monoxide poisoning from improper usage of a portable generator, and eight due to a heat-related illness, including heatstroke. This underscores the fact that many are trying to endure the dangerous summer heat levels in and around the hardest hit areas, such as Calcasieu and Cameron Parishes in southwest Louisiana, without electricity for fans or air conditioning.

Due to the speed with which Laura strengthened into a category 4 hurricane, mandatory evacuation orders were enforced on more than half a million residents in the hurricane's path. Louisiana state government is still sheltering around 12,000 people in hotels throughout the state, with the number expected to grow. The Department of Children and Family Services stated that 10,000 people are in hotels in New Orleans, around 1,000 in the capital of Baton Rouge and the cities of Shreveport and Houma, and around 500 in congregate shelters. As many as 10,000 have been placed in hotels in Texas, who have been advised to stay there due to declining vacancies in Louisiana.

Over a dozen hospitals and nursing homes had to evacuate their patients and residents, with many others running off backup generator power. The Lake Charles Memorial Hospital had to evacuate its patients after the city's water

supply and electricity went offline, forcing the hospital to import up to 100,000 gallons of water a day and run off of generator power to maintain limited emergency services. "Fully back to normal is really going to come down to the water supply and the electricity," spokesman Matt Felder told the *New Orleans Advocate*.

Over 50,000 people remain without power in Louisiana as a result of the hurricane's impact on the electrical grid. About 500 electrical towers were downed in the Lake Charles area, home to over 75,000 people. The hurricane caused over two dozen community water systems to go out across the state. Additionally, water wells, lines, and treatment facilities already outdated and under-maintained before the hurricane have been heavily damaged, leaving thousands without access to clean or even running water, and placing thousands under boil water advisories where there is still power to run the water systems.

Phillip May, the president and CEO of Entergy Louisiana, estimated that it will be weeks until the company's electrical system is back to normal due to how extensive the hurricane's damage was to the electrical grid. Thousands of high capacity transmission structures, poles, transformers, and distribution wire have either been destroyed or severely damaged. "It's not a restoration, it's literally a rebuild of our system," May said. The costs for the restoration will undoubtedly lead to an increase of the power bill for Entergy's customers throughout the state.

According to Brandon Frey, secretary of Louisiana's Public Service Commission, Laura did more damage to the electrical grid than Hurricanes Katrina and Rita combined, stating, "this is the worst damage to the transmission grid ever."

The combination of no electricity, high temperatures, and standing flood water has been a source of attraction for a massive swarm of mosquitoes from the outer marshland areas, which has already killed off hundreds of cattle in Evangeline and surrounding parishes. Entomologist David

Price said that some of these species of mosquitoes can spread Chikungunya and Dengue fever, another source of danger for residents trying to rebuild in the area.

David Currie, a store owner from Hackberry, a small town in Cameron Parish, said that Hurricane Laura was “a lot worse” than Hurricanes Rita (2005) and Ike (2008). “Everywhere you look, somebody has got something tore up, a lot of people don’t have homes to live in, trailer houses turned over, it’s just a mess,” he told WWL-TV.

The displacement of tens of thousands amid the COVID-19 pandemic and crowding in shelters will facilitate the spread of the coronavirus in the state and beyond. Lake Charles resident May Gutowski told Voice of America: “I’ve been in the hospital three times in the last year, and we’re both very worried about being out in crowds and getting the virus. But we couldn’t stay home with a Category 4 hurricane coming at us. What are we supposed to do?”

Calcasieu Parish Administrator Bryan Beam, commenting on the destruction the wind damage from Laura caused, said that “Rita—which was a big, nasty storm—frankly pales in comparison to this one, and I don’t have any problem saying that.”

The disaster unfolding in southwest Louisiana, which has largely gone underreported in the mainstream media following the first couple of days of the hurricane’s landfall, is feeding the growth of opposition to the federal government’s response. An episode of this was seen when two dozen evacuees from Lake Charles, DeRidder, and elsewhere marched to the federal building in New Orleans on September 10 to express their outrage at the inadequate assistance they’ve received from the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) so far.

FEMA has so far released around \$30 million in aid, providing a maximum payout amounting to a derisory \$35,000 per applicant. The estimated damage to the city of Lake Charles, the fifth largest in the state, and its surrounding areas is upwards of \$12 billion.

Pollution from the state’s oil, gas, and shipping industries in the aftermath of Hurricane Laura is still being assessed. Approximately 1,400 active oil and gas wells, as well as hundreds of “orphaned” wells were in Hurricane Laura’s path. The “orphaned” wells, thousands of which are inactive or low production, are owned by small companies, and many more are set to be orphaned as oil prices continue to fall. Offshore oil platforms, pipelines, and other chemical and gas plants and refineries in Calcasieu and Cameron parishes were in the path of Laura.

Bob Bea, a specialist in catastrophic risk management and former well manager for Shell, told Nola.com that “When it comes to how we manage our platforms, pipelines, and

wells, we here in the U.S. are not world leaders in risk management.” Desmongblog.com reported that oil sheen from affected sources has been spotted “along at least 20 miles of marsh and bayous that absorbed the full strength of the storm.” Wilma Subra, a chemist and technical adviser for the Louisiana Environmental Action Network, added: “All the focus at first was on that chlorine leak from BioLabs and the fire they had there, but a number of other facilities have had small leaks.”

Shipping navigation to and around the Port of Lake Charles, the 12th largest in the nation, which normally sees 1,200 ships aiming for the major petrochemical facilities and refineries pass through its vicinity annually, has been impaired. Channing Hayden, navigation director at the Lake Charles Harbor and Terminal District, said that Lake Charles produces “about 6 percent of the nation’s fuel,” and that “[i]f you see a spike in gasoline prices, it’s going to have a lot to do with the situation in Lake Charles.”

In the vein of his criminal remark last month that the death toll from the COVID-19 pandemic—which is now more than 920,000 worldwide—is what it is,” President Trump responded at a press briefing in Orange, Texas on August 30 that “you’ve had tremendous storms in Texas for many decades and for many centuries, and that’s the way it is.”

Trump speaks on behalf of an entire ruling capitalist class which has expressed its disinterest at every level of government in providing any progressive solution to the natural disasters conditioned by human-induced climate change.

Giving a cruder echo of Democratic Governor John Bel Edwards’ remark that it is “impossible” to determine when a large portion of southwest Louisiana will be inhabitable again following the hurricane, Trump continued: “We handle them as they come. All I can do is handle them as they come, and that’s what we do, and nobody has ever done a better job of it.”



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