

US House of Representatives holds hearing on Texas winter storm disaster

Trévon Austin
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The United States House Committee on Science, Space, and Technology held a hearing Thursday discussing the failure of Texas' power grid during winter storm Uri in February. The disaster left millions without power and water and killed more than 50 people in Texas, many by hypothermia as temperatures remained well below freezing for days.

From the very start of the meeting, it was clear that no serious attempt would be made by the Democratic Party-controlled committee to address the social crime that transpired last month.

The hearing, titled "Lessons Learned from the Texas Blackouts: Research Needs for a Secure and Resilient Grid," focused almost entirely on discussing the role future research could play in building more reliable energy grids across the United States. The majority of the questions raised in the discussion were inquiries about balancing green energy with traditional sources, protecting America's grid from foreign adversaries and how grids can be better managed locally.

Entirely absent from the three-hour-long meeting was any detailed discussion of the underlying causes of the catastrophic failure of Texas' electric infrastructure. Panelists mostly regurgitated what is common knowledge at this point: the state's power grid operator, the Energy Reliability Council of Texas (ERCOT) failed to prepare for extreme winter events, fossil fuel power plants failed most spectacularly during the crisis and the United States needs to invest in its infrastructure.

However, the question on the minds of millions of Americans is not what happened but rather why it happened. Why were energy corporations, which ultimately control Texas' power grid, allowed to neglect power stations at the expense of the public? Why did multiple warnings on the need to winterize

Texas' energy production go unheeded for decades? Finally, what is being done to immediately address the issue?

In her opening statement, Chairwoman Eddie Bernice Johnson (Democrat-Texas) made clear the advisory nature of the hearing. "I hope that as the Texas Legislature decides what to do in response to this crisis, they will heed the lessons that we all share with us today," Johnson said.

Therefore, the goal of the event essentially boiled down to assembling a panel of energy experts, asking them how to proceed, and passing down non-binding recommendations to the state government which bears a significant share of the responsibility for the disaster. For all intents and purposes, Thursday's hearing was no different than those held in 1989 and 2011 after similar weather events prompted inquiries into Texas' dilapidated power grid.

For its part, Texas' state government has done nothing. Currently, the state legislature is split on whether ERCOT should reverse a quarter of the \$16 billion the organization charged power companies during the crisis. The only measure passed so far in relation to the power failures was a bill recognizing "the electrical utility line and generation workers of Texas for their efforts during the 2021 winter storm."

Beth Garza, an ERCOT director from 2008 to 2019, attempted to cover up the role power companies played in the disaster during her testimony Thursday. She repeatedly stated it was too early to "draw conclusions" about the overall causes of the power grid failure. Additionally, Garza dismissed the government's failure to mandate the safety of the grid, and corporations' refusal to follow recommendations.

"Much has been made of the lack of mandatory winterizations standards for power plants, and I suggest

it's easy to say that winterization should be mandatory but effective regulations require a specific standard to be met. And such a standard should also have benefits that exceed costs," Garza said.

What costs is Garza referring to? Amid subfreezing temperatures, 4 million Texas households were without power for days. The failure of the power grid compromised water treatment facilities, leaving 14 million Texans without access to potable water. Dozens of people froze to death and succumbed to carbon monoxide poisoning.

In fact, corporate concern for "costs"—meaning anything which cuts into profit margins—is directly responsible for the catastrophe. The social tragedy in Texas is the product of a series of decisions made by private corporations and public officials, all driven by the drive to maximize profit.

The hearing's focus on research was entirely misplaced. It is already clear that the miserable state of Texas' power grid is not the dearth of research. The technology to protect the power grid from extreme weather already exists. Renewable and non-renewable power generators function in areas of extreme cold such as Alaska, Siberia, and northern Canada.

Over the course of decades, state politicians and power companies worked together to deregulate the power grid. As a result, power companies decide whether they will implement weatherization measures at power plants. Despite the experiences of previous storms and warnings of an increase in extreme weather events due to human induced climate change, corporate executives decided against winterizing the electric grid because it would cut into profits.

Winter storm Uri exposed the irrationality of the capitalist system. The safety and wellbeing of workers cannot be left to the whims of corporate executives or their political servants in the Democratic and Republican parties. The working class must take control of essential utilities and trillions must be expropriate from the banks and corporations and invested in modernizing infrastructure to safeguard the wellbeing of all of humanity.



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