

Historic power outages and more flooding in Michigan after severe thunderstorms

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A series of severe thunderstorms swept across Michigan on Wednesday night and Thursday morning causing flooding and power outages from the west side of the state down to the Ohio border before inflicting the most significant damage in the Detroit metropolitan area.

Up to four inches of rain and winds of 75 miles per hour caused flooding in streets and neighborhoods and shut down power to as many as one million residential and business customers of the primary electricity providers in the state, DTE Energy and Consumers Energy.

Guy Packard, the vice president of Consumers Energy's electric operations, told news media during a press conference on Thursday that the severe weather ranked "among the top 10 storms in our company's 135-year history." In an effort to deflect growing public anger over the failure once again of the company's decrepit and outdated infrastructure in the face of major weather events, Packard said, according to the *Detroit Free Press*, "it may feel like 90 degrees outside and the power may be out, but there's no problem that ice cream can't solve."

Consumers Energy tweeted on Thursday that it was giving out free ice cream and other "giveaways" to "thank customers for being patient as their crews work around the clock." Most customers who lost power are being told that the service will be restored by Saturday or Sunday, and others will not have electricity until sometime next week.

According to DTE Energy, the outages were primarily the result of downed power lines—including high-voltage structures that form the backbone of the system—broken poles and tree-related damage. A meeting between suburban Detroit government officials and the energy corporation failed to produce a coherent explanation for the disaster after a five-year tree-trimming initiative launched by DTE Energy in 2007 failed to stem the frequency and severity of power outages.

DTE has rejected proposals to put electric power lines

underground as too expensive, although this practice is common in Europe. This has led to a situation where it is routine for hundreds of thousands to lose power in even moderately severe storms. In a horrific incident in September 2010, downed power lines caused by strong winds led to a firestorm on the east side of Detroit that destroyed or damaged scores of homes.

The high winds this week brought trees down across the Detroit metropolitan area, some landing on houses and cars, and others landing in streets, making driving conditions extremely dangerous.

The two energy firms reported that more than 3,300 staff and out-of-state contractors were on the road and working around the clock to restore power throughout the region with priority placed on hospitals, nursing homes and police and fire stations. According to a report by ClickOnDetroit, Wisconsin, Ohio, Indiana and Illinois experienced power outages during the storms, but Michigan "seems to have been hit the hardest, having more than 10 times the outages than the other states."

In addition to the power outages, many communities experienced damaging floods during the downpour, which were exacerbated by the electricity failures. With pumping stations without power, the storm drainage systems were rendered inoperable and the Detroit-area freeways I-75 and I-94 were closed due to the flooding.

Diane Cross of the Michigan Department of Transportation (MDOT) told the *Detroit News*, "It was just everywhere at one time. We got such a large volume of water in a short amount of time and without any power at a majority of our pump houses we were not able to pump that water off." MDOT has said it would cost about \$50 million to put portable generators in all 140 Metro Detroit pump houses.

According to a recent analysis, about half of the state's pumping stations are in poor condition. Meanwhile, as rainwater continues to back up, major water damage is

affecting homes in neighborhoods close to the freeways as the water fills up basements and other residential structures.

The storms on Wednesday night and Thursday morning followed two other recent storms in Michigan and Detroit, one on June 25–28, which included tornados, poured eight inches of rain and resulted in a state of emergency declaration by Michigan Governor Whitmer, and another storm on July 16, which caused widespread flooding and residential property damage.

The rising anger of the public over the repeated failure of infrastructure in the face of severe weather, hardly unknown in the region, has been taken note of by the ruling establishment. Governor Whitmer, while visiting the Lansing suburb of Okemos on Thursday, said, “There are many who are stressed out and exhausted from this.”

A resident of Royal Oak north of Detroit described the impact of the power outage, “I’m in a multi-story building of 200-plus seniors, where being sick and vulnerable is practically a definition of being a tenant here. We’ve had no electricity for 44 hours. A small generator runs constantly to power the insulin fridges, and we are allowed to charge cell phones. There is no cooking or internet and no air conditioning, which, in a ‘modern’ high rise is the only way to stay cool.

“The emergency elevator is working, but I am afraid of COVID crowding and breakdowns. Food has all gone bad, so if we are last, we are in bad shape. Many won’t be escaping the building for cooling centers or anything like that because of the inability to go up and down stairs and fear of small elevator air.

“It feels like survival, but I really fear some people, who made it all the way to this new COVID wave, won’t be able to beat this. At least the cold water is running. Management just brought one meal, and some are making it out to relatives if it is not back on by evening.”



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