

# Texas power grid remains unprepared for severe winter storms

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The Texas electricity grid remains vulnerable to severe winter weather events almost a year after the deadly winter storm Uri caused widespread blackouts and killed an estimated 700 people last February.

Republican Governor Greg Abbott has repeatedly claimed that the utility system will be able to withstand a major storm. During a press conference in early December with Peter Lake, chair of the Public Utility Commission of Texas, the two men issued a “guarantee” that Texans’ lights will not go out this winter.

But it has become increasingly clear that these claims have no substance.

Data released by Electric Reliability Council of Texas (ERCOT) and analyses by industry experts shows that the Texas electric grid is still unprepared for severe winter weather. And recent reporting from the *Texas Tribune* revealed that Abbott only met with industry leaders several weeks after the press conference, failing to validate his claims before announcing them publicly.

Abbott’s promise that lights will stay on this winter is a political move meant to bolster his reelection campaign for 2022. He has gambled on the possibility that severe weather will not impact the electric grid, hoping he will be able to take credit for improving the system and rectifying the disaster of February 2021.

It is no coincidence that Democrat Beto O’Rourke announced his candidacy for Governor in mid-November. O’Rourke has been a vocal critique of Abbott’s handling of the winter disaster, making the blackouts a central focus of his campaign so far.

“This ‘promise’ is dangerous, potentially deadly,” said O’Rourke after Abbott’s press conference. “Experts continue to warn that Texas could face another grid failure the next time we experience an

extreme weather event. Abbott and his appointees shouldn’t be betting our lives on the weather.”

With 60 percent of Texas voters voicing disapproval of the state’s handling of the issue, according to a University of Texas/ *Texas Tribune* Poll in October, both candidates will be seeking to capitalize on whatever the winter season holds in store for the electric grid.

Abbott even went as far as to intervene in the Association of Electric Companies of Texas (AECT), requesting them to put a “positive” spin on the condition of the grid weatherization. On December 8, the same day as Lake’s press conference, AECT released a statement detailing preparation plans for winter weatherization but stopped short of making any claims about the ability to withstand severe winter weather this year.

Several electric companies have made advances in updating their equipment in preparation for a major winter storm. However, natural gas companies, which supply nearly 45 percent of the energy for electricity production, have largely not.

This is due to a loophole in recent Texas legislation mandating winter weather improvements in the electric grid that allows gas companies to claim an exemption to the new regulations. Rules enacted by the Public Utility Commission allow gas utility companies to submit an exemption request detailing their inability to comply with the new regulations and plans to weatherize in the future.

Additional regulations by the Texas Railroad Commission, which is in charge of regulating the natural gas sector, are written to mandate weatherproofing by 2023 but also allow gas companies to opt out of the regulations by declining to register as “critical infrastructure.”

Texas lawmakers, Republican and Democrat alike, claimed to be astonished to learn that the legislation they themselves had passed included these loopholes. During a Texas Senate committee hearing in the fall of 2021 with Railroad Commission executive director Wei Wang, senators lambasted the director for failing to enforce utility weatherization. Wang, however, informed the senators that his commission had simply written their rules to mirror the language of the law passed earlier that year.

As a result, Texas has done “next to nothing” to weatherize the gas supply system, according to Doug Lewin, an Austin-based energy consultant interviewed by the *Texas Tribune*.

“We don’t have a regulatory system in place that holds the industry accountable. That is the problem,” Lewin continued. “It’s not a technology or engineering problem. It’s a regulatory problem.”

The collapse of the natural gas supply chain was a significant factor in causing the rolling blackouts that affected much of the state last February. During the storm up to half of the state’s gas supply was incapacitated due to frozen equipment and weather conditions. Notably, many gas utilities were unable to function due to power outages caused by the shortage of gas, resulting in a feedback loop of inadequate supplies of fuel and electricity.

Given the poor state of weatherization in Texas, it is no wonder that ERCOT’s own projections show that even a weaker storm than the one last year could cause widespread blackouts. ERCOT’s most severe projection for this winter estimates that Texans will demand 73,000 megawatts at any given time. Yet experts say Texas required 77,000 megawatts to keep the lights and heat on during winter storm Uri.

While ERCOT predicts a low probability of its worst case scenario occurring, in four out of the five scenarios considered, the grid would be short by a significant amount of power. With severe winter weather becoming a more and more common occurrence in Texas due to the impact of climate change, the state’s regulators and utility companies are playing a dangerous game of chance that could cost lives.

A lack of data from regulators and industry sources makes it impossible to know how many facilities have been weatherized, but reports indicate that the industry as a whole is woefully unprepared. According to Todd

Staples, president of the Texas Oil and Gas Association, more than 1,000 facilities have handed in the paperwork to be registered as “critical infrastructure.” This is up from 60 last year, and those facilities would be bound by the law to make winter weather improvements.

However, that 1,000 is out of over 250,000 across the state. Without any official data about how many facilities are actually prepared for another major winter storm, Texans are left in the dark about whether the electric grid will survive another significant weather event.



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