

Virginia state officials ignored National Weather Service warnings about catastrophic snowstorm that left thousands stranded on interstate

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Officials with the Virginia Department of Transportation (VDOT) were given information ahead of time by the National Weather Service (NWS) about a snowstorm that wreaked havoc in Northern Virginia on January 3-5. The snowstorm—which came after unusually warm weather in December—brought heavy snowfall (between 5-12 inches) and plunged the Washington D.C. region into chaos.

The *Washington Post* reported last week that forecasters from the NWS provided ample warnings to VDOT officials, beginning with emails on the morning of January 2, almost 24 hours before the storm began. This was followed by an online briefing that predicted a potential “worst case scenario” of rapid snowfall leading to an accumulation of up to 12 inches around Fredericksburg. This prediction, incidentally, is precisely what occurred.

That same morning, VDOT also received a separate warning from a private forecasting company called DTN, which predicted rapid snowfall of up to 2-3 inches per hour on the morning of the 3rd, with a total accumulation of 4-8 inches for most of northern Virginia, with a few regions receiving even more.

The storm resulted in numerous deaths, widespread power outages and scores of vehicular accidents. Virginia State Police reported hundreds of car crashes and over 1,400 disabled or stranded vehicles.

The most catastrophic impact was felt by motorists on Interstate-95. A 50-mile stretch of the highway between Dumfries and Ruther Glen was blocked off after several tractor-trailers lost traction and crashed or were “jackknifed”—a position that leaves a semi-truck totally

immobilized. Thousands of vehicles were trapped in the inclement weather, some for over 24 hours. Many of the passengers went without food, water or medication.

Rescue efforts fell short due to staff shortages brought on by a surge in COVID-19 infections. One man froze to death after exiting his disabled vehicle and attempting to walk to his home near Lake Anna in the midst of the storm. To the north, three people died in Montgomery County, Maryland after their vehicle collided with a snowplow. The storm also shutdown COVID-19 testing centers in the midst of a huge surge of cases in the region.

According to the *Post*, “[a]t 2 p.m. on Jan. 2, the Sterling office [of the NWS] delivered an online briefing to the Metro Area Transportation Operations Committee, which includes VDOT’s Northern Virginia district and other D.C.-area transportation agencies.” The *Post* quotes the NWS’s Christopher Strong, a warning coordination specialist, who “leaned very heavily on not just what was most likely, but also the reasonable worst case for planning.”

DTN spokesperson Lori Johnson likewise notes that the organization “provided VDOT with weather briefings on Jan. 2 and 3 at 10 a.m. and that hourly updates were available online.” The *Post* notes in a separate editorial that despite these warnings, it “was not until more than five hours later that the district office issued a news release about the danger of heavy snow.” Likewise, there was no effort to shutdown the major highways or even to prevent semi-trucks—a major factor in the highway disaster—from traveling that day.

Interstate 95 is the primary north-south highway on the east coast of the United States, running from Miami on the tip of Florida to the Canadian border in Maine. It passes through 15 states as well as the District of Columbia, and serves as the main link between all of the major cities on the eastern seaboard. The highway serves 110 million people, and it facilitates some 40 percent of the US GDP.

The enormous commercial importance of the highway, particularly in light of the global supply chain crisis, was almost certainly a factor behind the decision not to close down the roadway ahead of the snowstorm.

The revelations of state negligence came as the east coast was struck by another winter storm on January 17. Over 118,000 people across five states were left without power, with unusually heavy snowfall affecting southern states including the Carolinas, Georgia, Alabama and Mississippi.

In the immediate aftermath of the January 3 storm, the administration of then-Democratic Governor Ralph Northam attempted to downplay its culpability for the disaster. Northam and VDOT officials took turns claiming that the amount of snowfall could not possibly have been anticipated or that their supposedly well-publicized warnings went unheeded by thoughtless motorists. This has all been exposed as self-serving and bald-faced lies.

Northam, in what may be considered his parting words to the Commonwealth of Virginia before being succeeded by Republican Glenn Youngkin last week, appeared on a radio show a few days after the storm to say that he was “sick and tired of people talking about what went wrong” in the state’s disaster response. “Why don’t you start asking some of these individuals that were out on the highway for hours: ... ‘Why did you feel it was so important to drive through such a snowstorm?’” he said.

In comments to the *Post*, Jonathan Porter, chief meteorologist for AccuWeather, stresses that this was, in fact, the outcome of inaction on the part of state authorities. “I’m of the mind-set that this was a completely preventable situation.”

Porter went on, “We were alarmed about it and did everything we could to get the message out... We specifically said that conditions would rapidly deteriorate and that highway chaos would ensue.” The meteorologist stated that VDOT should have issued

travel bans and closed down the highways ahead of the snowstorm.

VDOT officials have promised an investigation to “address performance gaps and identify ways to mitigate the challenges faced during this incident.” Likewise, state Democrats have proposed bills to save face that would place limited restrictions for trucks on the highways when it is snowing.

The January 3 snowstorm, a relatively minor bout of inclement weather that was predicted well ahead of time, testifies to the irrationality of a social system operated on the basis of private profit. It is an episode within the much larger social catastrophe that has unfolded in the capitalist class’s homicidal response to the COVID-19 pandemic.



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