

Fast-moving storm system in the Mid-Atlantic region results in missing persons, hundreds of thousands without power

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A series of fast-moving storms this week in Maryland and Virginia left hundreds of thousands without power in their homes in the humid July heat.

In the heavily populated Washington D.C. area, nearly 230,000 homes and businesses were without electricity on Tuesday. The Baltimore region saw nearly 60,000 outages early in the week.

Prince George's County, Maryland, clocked wind speeds at up to 90 mph, "equivalent to a low-end EF1 tornado," noted the *Baltimore Sun*. In Olney, nearly 20 homes were destroyed by falling trees, with a dozen families displaced as a result.

The *Sun* interviewed Greenbelt resident Shaconya Matthews, who told the newspaper that a tree limb tore the roof off of her top-floor apartment while she was at work. "Through the sheets of rain and howling wind ... She answered the phone to the sound of her daughter screaming and crying. So she cried, too," wrote the *Sun*.

By Thursday, there were still 6,000 power outages in the D.C. region, mostly concentrated east of the city. Nearly 30,000 remain without power in the Baltimore region.

The extensive damage to the electrical grid left many working families without air conditioning amid one of the hottest months of the year. College Park, Maryland, where residents had encountered tornado-force winds, has reportedly set up four additional cooling centers for affected people.

The infrastructural damage has compounded the D.C. area's cost of living crisis. The *Post* interviewed 19-year-old Fermin Vergaza, who told reporters that his family was being forced to throw out the food they had bought before the storm. "It's going to be expensive,

since we went to the grocery store basically two days ago. We spent a lot of money—we spent \$200 on groceries. And we have to throw all that away" due to food going bad, he said.

According to a Capital Area Food Bank survey last month, one in three people in the region are food insecure. "One in three residents of the greater Washington area needed support in the last year getting good food on their table. There's no way to get around how profound and staggering that is," stated Capital Area Food Bank President and CEO Radha Muttiah to the *Post*.

The storms' hardest impact was felt in the rural regions of Virginia. In southwestern Virginia, at least 40 persons remain unaccounted for after flooding in Buchanan County left "small houses washed from their foundations and vehicles encased in mud," wrote the *Post*. The county registered 4.55 inches of rain in a little over two hours.

Virginia Department of Emergency Management spokesperson Lauren Opett told the *Post*, "[t]here is no power, no landline service, and no cellphone service in the affected area which is also impacting the ability to reach residents." Virginia's Republican Governor Glenn Youngkin responded by declaring a state of emergency.

Buchanan County, located on the Virginia border with both West Virginia and Kentucky, was once a center of American mining. The surrounding region is the location of the Pocahontas coalfield. According to the late coal operator W.P. Tams, who wrote an authoritative historical account of the region in the 1960s, the Pocahontas coal seam produced some of the best coal on Earth and was the United States military's

primary coal source during both world wars.

In 1989–1990, neighboring Russell, Tazewell and Wise counties were the central locations of the ten-month-long Pittston miners strike. The strike was provoked by the Pennsylvania-based Pittston Coal Company when it tried to shed contractual obligations to its employees amid a protracted financial crisis.

Today, the region is in terminal decline and Buchanan County and the Southwest Virginia (SWVA) region as a whole stands as the most impoverished region in the state. According to the US Census, nearly a quarter of Buchanan County lives below the poverty line.

The storm system comes nearly 10 years after a devastating derecho swept across the Midwest and Mid-Atlantic United States in June 2012, leaving nearly \$3 billion in infrastructure and personal property damage in its wake and killing dozens of people. The storm system, referred to as a “land hurricane” by the *Washington Post*, featured winds averaging 75 mph and left over 1 million homes without power in the D.C. area for several weeks.

The *World Socialist Web Site* wrote at the time that the derecho’s “victims are essentially left to fend for themselves,” as social infrastructure, emergency services, even maintenance of the power grid, has been “left threadbare” as capitalist governments prioritize profiteering over health and safety. This situation continues to prevail in Virginia and across the United States, exacerbating the impact of storms which are growing in frequency and intensity due to the impact of capitalist-induced climate change.



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