

Driven by climate change, devastating winter storm kills at least 29 across the US

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A massive, coast-to-coast winter storm has killed at least 29 people and plunged hundreds of thousands into darkness and cold, leaving a trail of destruction from New Mexico to New England. The storm has been characterized by meteorologists as the worst ten days of winter in 40 years.

Beginning on Friday, the sprawling winter storm blanketed more than half of the continental US in snow, ice and freezing rain, impacting hundreds of millions of people. Snow was reported on the ground across about 56 percent of the lower 48 states, with at least a foot of accumulation recorded in 18 states from New Mexico through the Midwest and into New England.

The system drove bitterly cold air deep into the eastern two-thirds of the country, keeping temperatures below freezing in large parts of the South and Central US. Ice accumulation—explicitly called “catastrophic” in advance by the National Weather Service—proved especially devastating in the South, coating trees and power lines with up to half an inch of ice across at least a dozen states.

Meteorologists note that half an inch of ice can add hundreds of pounds of weight to power infrastructure, snapping poles and bringing down entire spans of distribution lines. Winds gusting to around 25 miles per hour in parts of the Southeast compounded the damage and made restoration efforts treacherous.

The impact has included widespread structural damage with collapsed roofs under heavy snow loads in parts of the Midwest and Northeast, while in the South and lower Midwest tree fall and ice damage severed power lines, blocked roads and crushed vehicles and homes.

Even as the snowfall shifted into New England, dangerous wind chills and lingering ice left millions facing a second, man-made disaster: being stranded without heat, light, or running water in subfreezing temperatures.

As of this writing on Monday, at least 29 deaths had been officially attributed to the storm and the associated cold, a figure that is certain to rise as authorities assess remote and impoverished areas and as delayed health impacts become apparent. Initial reports document the grim conditions facing a cross-section of the working class and poor.

In Louisiana, at least two people died of hypothermia, unable to survive hours of exposure as temperatures plunged in communities unaccustomed to such sustained cold. In Kansas, a woman died of hypothermia after being stranded in the storm, while Texas authorities reported at least one of two storm-related fatalities as hypothermia as well.

Tennessee officials confirmed at least three deaths linked to the storm, including people killed in traffic accidents on icy roads and individuals found outside or in unheated dwellings after power failures.

Local reports from New England and the Midwest include the death of a woman in Massachusetts struck and killed by a snowplow, and other victims killed in crashes on snow-covered highways. In many cases, the storm acted as the trigger within conditions of broader social neglect such as elderly residents living alone without adequate heating, homeless people forced onto the streets, and workers compelled to travel in deadly

conditions to keep low-wage jobs.

These deaths are the predictable result of a system that treats shelter, warmth and safe infrastructure not as basic social rights, but as circumstances contingent on profit and austerity.

The worst immediate impacts have centered on ice-buried regions of the South and snow-choked regions of the Midwest and Northeast, where power outages have overlapped with dangerous cold.

As of Monday, more than 760,000 to 830,000 customers nationwide were without electricity, down from a peak of over one million but still leaving hundreds of thousands exposed to freezing temperatures. Tennessee has been among the hardest hit, with about 230,000 to 250,000 customers losing power at the height of the storm, the highest number of outages at one time in the history of Nashville Electric Service.

The utility reported at least 97 broken poles and dozens of downed distribution circuits, warning that some areas would face “multi-day” restoration due to the extent of the damage.

In Mississippi, electric cooperatives described damage in northern counties as “devastating,” noting that the destruction of trees and vegetation, combined with icy secondary roads, would make power restoration “prolonged.” Tens of thousands of customers in Mississippi remained in the dark Monday, and officials acknowledged that in rural communities and poor towns with aging infrastructure, the outages could last for a week or more.

Louisiana has reported more than 120,000 customers without power at various points, concentrated in parishes where ice-laden trees brought down feeders and blocked access for repair crews. In parts of Texas, Arkansas and Alabama, scattered but severe ice damage has produced pockets of blackouts that are especially dangerous because they are dispersed across large areas with limited emergency resources.

Farther north, heavy snow has crippled transportation and local infrastructure from the Ohio Valley to New England. The National Weather Service forecast up to 18 inches of snow in parts of New England, with schools and workplaces closed across wide swaths of the region as crews struggle to clear roads and sidewalks.

In the Midwest—particularly in states like Minnesota, Wisconsin and Michigan—snow and extreme cold have led to road closures, pile-ups and numerous crashes, with some residents facing intermittent power loss as ice and wind stress already-fragile grids.

Air travel has also been severely disrupted, with hundreds of flights canceled or delayed at major hubs as de-icing operations, runway closures, and staffing shortages rippled through the system. For workers, this has meant lost income and additional costs, compounding the strains of inflation, high rents and stagnant wages.

Meteorologists have emphasized that the storm was the product of a volatile interaction between abundant subtropical moisture from the Southwest and Gulf of Mexico, and a distended polar vortex that drove Arctic air deep into the continental US. The result was a sprawling, slow-moving system capable of producing, in the words of experts,

damage comparable to a major hurricane across landlocked regions.

Ryan Maue, former chief scientist at the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration and now a private meteorologist, warned before the storm that “we are poised to see a potentially historic Arctic ‘polar vortex’ blast across North America into the end of January.” As the event unfolded, he cautioned that 230 million people could see temperatures of 20 degrees Fahrenheit or lower, with 150 million subjected to snow and ice.

Maue described the core of the stretched polar vortex settling over areas like Duluth, Minnesota, producing “long-lasting, brutal cold,” with temperatures plunging to approximately minus 25 to minus 30 degrees in the North and Midwest. Average low temperatures across the contiguous US during the storm period were projected to fall to around 11 to 12 degrees—a nationwide cold that ensured any infrastructure failure would have immediate, life-threatening implications.

Judah Cohen, a winter weather specialist and research scientist at MIT (Massachusetts Institute of Technology), explained that the distortion of the polar vortex was closely linked to ongoing changes in the Arctic, including record-low sea ice and altered snow cover patterns in Siberia. Shifts in the Arctic and decreasing sea ice as early as October 2025 “essentially loaded the dice” for a major polar vortex event, he noted, under conditions shaped by global warming.

Meteorologists have stressed that this is not a simple “cold outbreak” contradicting climate change, but an example of how a warming Arctic is destabilizing the jet stream and polar vortex, increasing the likelihood of extreme winter events over the mid-latitudes.

The human impact of the storm has been sharply magnified by the systematic dismantling of emergency preparedness and the decrepit state of basic infrastructure, above all the electric grid in the US. It is already clear that federal and state authorities were late and inadequate in providing information, warming centers, and coordinated assistance to millions in the storm’s path.

Local officials begged residents to prepare in the last days before the storm, but most working class families and the elderly lack the resources to stockpile generators, backup heating, or days’ worth of food and medicine. Instead of an informed and robust federal response, communities have been largely left to fend for themselves, with scattered shelters and ad hoc warming stations opening only after the full scale of the outages became obvious and dependent upon charity to fund their operations.

This is the direct product of the policies of the Trump administration as the Department of Homeland Security has slashed FEMA’s disaster response staff, even as extreme weather disasters multiply. Internal documents show that as 2026 began, FEMA abruptly notified dozens of disaster response and recovery workers—members of its temporary but critical “CORE” staff—that their contracts would not be renewed, effectively laying them off in the middle of winter.

These layoffs come on top of thousands of departures in 2025 driven by buyouts and cuts, leaving FEMA with a workforce already about 35 percent below its target level, according to a Government Accountability Office assessment.

Trump-appointed DHS officials have pursued a broader plan to “restructure” FEMA and shift responsibility for disaster response onto the states, despite widespread acknowledgment that most states are incapable of handling large-scale catastrophes on their own. The slow, fragmented and chaotic response to the present winter storm is not an accident but an entirely expected outcome.

For years, climate and weather scientists have warned that global warming will intensify the scale and volatility of extreme weather, including heavy precipitation events, heat waves and, paradoxically, certain kinds of severe winter storms. The current event—combining a moisture-laden storm track from the Southwest with a destabilized polar

vortex and record-low Arctic sea ice—is a real-time concrete expression of these warnings.

However, the Trump administration, embedded with the fossil fuel corporations and the financial oligarchy, has refused to take even minimal measures to reduce emissions, overhaul energy systems, or rebuild infrastructure under public ownership and democratic control. Instead, emissions continue largely unabated and public funds are channeled into war and repression.

Meanwhile, Trump has stacked key agencies with climate deniers, attacked the scientific integrity of NOAA and other federal research bodies, and pushed policies to expand oil, gas and coal extraction. He has repeatedly derided climate science as a hoax and now oversees the gutting of FEMA and other emergency capacities precisely when they are most needed.

For their part, the Democrats have responded with complicity. While issuing empty statements about “believing the science,” they have accepted the basic framework of austerity and corporate profit, voting for military budgets and corporate bailouts while leaving the climate to “market forces.”

The response to this winter storm follows the same pattern that characterized the ruling class handling of the COVID-19 pandemic and the ongoing global health crisis. In both cases, officials knew in advance what was coming. In both cases, they refused to act in time or at the necessary scale, prioritizing corporate profits and “market stability” over human life.

The devastation of this winter storm is not simply a meteorological event; it has social and political origin. People have already died and more will die as hundreds of thousands remain without power in freezing conditions, and the most vulnerable—elderly people, the poor, the disabled, migrant and homeless populations—are being left to fend for themselves in the dark.

The underlying causes lie in decades of underinvestment, deregulation, privatization and the systematic subordination of all aspects of life to the enrichment of a tiny capitalist and financial oligarchy.

Trump’s second-term assault on FEMA and other federal emergency services, including mass layoffs, is nothing less than sabotage of society’s basic capacity to respond to disaster. This is part of the authoritarian and anti-science agenda that seeks to dismantle any remaining public constraints on corporate power and to render the population defenseless in the face of climate-accelerated catastrophe.



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