

# Where did the snow go? Blizzard was a miss, but not a bust

January 27 2015, by Seth Borenstein And Geoff Mulvihill

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Pedestrians and cars cross the Brooklyn Bridge, Tuesday, Jan. 27, 2015 in New York. Gov. Andrew Cuomo says a snowstorm-related New York City area travel ban is lifted, except for Suffolk County on Long Island. (AP Photo/Mark Lennihan)

In the wild world of winter weather, location is everything, which New York and Massachusetts learned too well Tuesday.

Small last-minute changes in the air morphed what was supposed to be

crippling feet of snow into a handful of inches in New York, leading one forecaster to apologize, the National Weather Service boss to get defensive, politicians to explain themselves and some Northeast residents wondering where the much-hyped snow went.

The not-so-great blizzard of 2015 did wallop other parts of the Northeast as predicted: Long Island and Massachusetts got hammered with more than 2 feet of snow. Auburn, Massachusetts, got hit with 32 inches and there was severe coastal flooding, National Weather Service Director Louis Uccellini said.

But snowfall in the self-absorbed media capital of New York City, shut down in advance, was under a foot. New Jersey and Philadelphia also were spared.

In a conference call with reporters Tuesday, a defensive Uccellini, who wrote textbooks on winter storms, wouldn't say his agency's forecast was off. Instead, he blamed the way meteorologists communicated and said the weather service needs to do a better job addressing uncertainty.

Private meteorologist Ryan Maue of Weather Bell Analytics slammed the public agency for ratcheting up forecast storm amounts before the system arrived, instead of telling people how uncertain it was.

"The public should be upset that the forecast was blown for NYC and ask for answers," he said in an email.

Uccellini said the agency would review those procedures and consult with social scientists to improve messaging.

But Uccellini said he'd rather warn too much and be wrong, than not warn enough. He said the weather service's predictions and citywide closures that they prompted made for a faster recovery.

"This was the right forecast decision to make," Uccellini said.

Meteorologists say the nor'easter strayed about 75 to 100 miles east of its predicted track, which meant the western edge—New York and New Jersey—got 10 inches less than forecast.

"That miss occurred in the most populous corridor in the nation," said David Robinson, director of the Rutgers Global Snow Lab and New Jersey's state climatologist. "Had it been between Albany and Syracuse, not to disparage them, no one would have made much of this."

The region girded for something historic but got much less.

"I expected tons of snow," New York cabaret singer Susanne Payot said, walking through Central Park with her home-from-school daughters and their golden retriever, Alvin. "This is nothing. I don't understand why the whole city shut down because of this."

Before heavy snows began falling, officials shut down roads and public transportation across in New York City, in New Jersey and on Long Island. Amtrak suspended train service and air traffic slowed to a stop. Schools along the East Coast on Monday canceled Tuesday classes.



Shaon Chowdhury, right, manager of Arthur Cab Leasing Corp., and employee Kyle Hinkson, of Harlem, clear snow from a taxi while preparing to put it back into service following a winter storm, Tuesday, Jan. 27, 2015, in the Queens borough of New York. Chowdhury estimates that the winter storm has cost his company approximately \$60,000 in lost revenue and added expenses. (AP Photo/Jason DeCrow)

New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie defended his decision to ban travel on all state roads.

"I was being told as late as 9 o'clock last night that we were looking at 20-inch accumulations in most of New Jersey. If, in fact, that is what would have happened, having these types of things in effect were absolutely the right decision to make," Christie told WABC-TV on Tuesday. "We were acting based on what we were being told."

New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo said he was criticized for under-

reacting to the November mega storm in Buffalo, so he worked "on the theory of living learned and a little wiser."

Irwin Redlener, the director of Columbia University's National Center for Disaster Preparedness and an unpaid adviser to New York Mayor Bill de Blasio, said Tuesday that the way the region came to a halt ahead of the storm was good practice.



A Q train arrives at the Newkirk Plaza subway station as service resumed, following forecasters call for a winter emergency, Tuesday, Jan. 27, 2015, in New York. Meteorologists say a nor'easter stayed about 75 to 100 miles east of its predicted track, which meant New York City stayed in the single digits. (AP Photo/Bebeto Matthews)

"It's not whether the city should have prepared so much, it's how people respond," Redlener said. "We don't want the population to get so cynical

that they're not heeding the warnings."

A National Weather Service forecaster who was called a hero of 2012's Superstorm Sandy tweeted an apology for the errant forecast.

"You made a lot of tough decisions expecting us to get it right, and we didn't. Once again, I'm sorry," wrote Gary Szatkowski, a National Weather Service forecaster in Mount Holly, New Jersey.

Uccellini downplayed Szatkowski's apology.

The storm spun up in the ocean, where there are few monitors to help meteorologists and computer models pinpoint the track, forecasters said. In such a storm, an error of 50 miles "can be a big difference," said Jeff Masters, meteorology director of the private service Weather Underground.

Late Monday, the computer models started to move the storm more east and away from New York City, but by that time "media and social media hype was out of the bottle," said University of Georgia meteorology professor Marshall Shepherd.

The European computer model that was praised for accurately forecasting Superstorm Sandy failed more than others, Masters said.

"It's just that we didn't get the western edge of the forecast correct. If you want to call that a bust, I think you're being a little harsh," Masters said.



Lisetta Shah cross-country skis on Commercial Street in Portland, Maine, Tuesday, Jan 27, 2015, during a winter storm in downtown Portland, Maine. "I'll probably never get another chance to ski in the city," she said, explaining why she was outing the blizzard. Forecasters with the National Weather Service in Gray have said that much of southern Maine will see 12 to 18 inches of snow, while small bands of intense snowfall will increase those totals in localized areas. (AP Photo/Robert F. Bukaty)

Robinson, Shepherd and others said meteorologists probably erred more in the way they relayed the forecast to the public than the prediction itself.

"In reality, nothing went wrong, the models were always iffy in NYC area," Shepherd said in an email. "We just have to do a better job of communicating the story."

Not good enough, said some unhappy commuters waiting for the first PATH trains to leave Jersey City for New York on Tuesday.

Vikram Kanagala, 33, who works in finance, said he was frustrated by officials' response.

"Definitely unacceptable," he said. "I think they should have done a better job with real-world decisions."

Brandon Bhajan, a security guard in New York City, wasn't upset. "I don't think they (city) overblew it," he said. "I think it's like the situation with Ebola ... if you over-cover, people are ready and prepared."

**More information:** National Weather Service snowfall totals:  
[1.usa.gov/1yLn87Q](http://1.usa.gov/1yLn87Q)

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