

Frozen pipes, electric woes remain as cold snap eases grip

February 21 2021, by Jake Bleiberg and Mark Scoloro



From left, U.S. Representatives Sheila Jackson Lee, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, and Sylvia Garcia, fill boxes at the Houston Food Bank on Saturday, Feb. 20, 2021. President Joe Biden declared a major disaster in Texas on Friday, directing federal agencies to help in the recovery. (Elizabeth Conley/Houston Chronicle via AP)

Higher temperatures spread across the southern United States on Saturday, bringing relief to a winter-weary region that faces a challenging clean-up and expensive repairs from days of extreme cold and widespread power outages.

In hard-hit Texas, where millions were warned to boil [tap water](#) before drinking it, the warm-up was expected to last for several days. The thaw produced burst pipes throughout the region, adding to the list of woes from severe conditions that were blamed for more than 70 deaths.

By Saturday afternoon, the sun had come out in Dallas and temperatures were nearing the 50s. People emerged to walk and jog in residential neighborhoods after days indoors. Many roads had dried out, and patches of snow were melting. Snowmen slumped.

Linda Nguyen woke up in a Dallas hotel room Saturday morning with an assurance she hadn't had in nearly a week: She and her cat had somewhere to sleep with power and [water](#).

Electricity had been restored to her apartment on Wednesday. But when Nguyen arrived home from work the next evening, she found a soaked carpet. A pipe had burst in her bedroom.

"It's essentially unlivable," said Nguyen, 27, who works in real estate. "Everything is completely ruined."

Deaths attributed to the weather include a man at an Abilene health care facility where the lack of water pressure made medical treatment impossible. Officials also reported deaths from hypothermia, including homeless people and those inside buildings with no power or heat. Others died in car accidents on icy roads or from suspected carbon

monoxide poisoning.



A pickup sends a wake of snow melt high into the air as the driver plows through a large puddle at Barrow and South 11th streets intersection in Abilene, Texas, Friday, Feb. 19, 2021. Temperatures climbed above freezing for the first time since Sunday's record 14.8-inch snowfall. (Ronald W. Erdrich, The Abilene Reporter-News via AP)

Roughly half the deaths reported so far occurred in Texas, with multiple fatalities also in Tennessee, Kentucky, Oregon and a few other Southern and Midwestern states.

A Tennessee farmer died trying to save two calves from a frozen pond.

President Joe Biden's office said Saturday he has declared a major disaster in Texas, directing federal agencies to help in the recovery.

U.S. Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, a New York Democrat, tweeted Saturday that she helped raise more than \$3 million toward relief. She was soliciting help for a Houston food bank, one of 12 Texas organizations she said would benefit from the donations.

The storms left more than 300,000 still without power across the country on Saturday, many of them in Texas, Louisiana and Mississippi.

More than 50,000 Oregon electricity customers were among those without power, more than a week after an ice storm ravaged the [electrical grid](#). Portland General Electric had hoped to have service back to all but 15,000 customers by Friday night. But the utility discovered additional damage in previously inaccessible areas.



City of Austin Water Utility workers Joey Putman, left, and Salvador Tinajero repairs a broken water main near 11th and Red River streets in Austin, Texas, on Friday, Feb. 19, 2021./ (Jay Janner/Austin American-Statesman via AP)

Oregon Gov. Kate Brown ordered the National Guard to go door-to-door in some areas to check on residents' welfare. At its peak, what was the worst ice storm in 40 years knocked out power to more than 350,000 customers.

In West Virginia, Appalachian Power was working on a list of about 1,500 places that needed repair, as about 44,000 customers in the state remained without electricity after experiencing back-to-back ice storms Feb. 11 and Feb. 15. More than 3,200 workers were attempting to get

power back online, their efforts spread across the six most affected counties on Saturday.

In Wayne County, West Virginia, workers had to replace the same pole three times because trees kept falling on it.

Texas Gov. Greg Abbott met Saturday with legislators from both parties to discuss energy prices as Texans face massive spikes in their electric bills after wholesale energy prices skyrocketed while power plants were offline.

"We have a responsibility to protect Texans from spikes in their energy bills" resulting from the weather, he said in a statement.



U.S. Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez talks to the media before volunteering at the Houston Food Bank on Saturday, Feb. 20, 2021. President Joe Biden declared a major disaster in Texas on Friday, directing federal agencies to help in the recovery. (Elizabeth Conley/Houston Chronicle via AP)

Water woes added misery for people across the South who went without heat or electricity for days after the ice. Snow storms forced rolling blackouts from Minnesota to Texas.

Robert Tuskey was retrieving tools from the back of his pickup truck Saturday afternoon as he prepared to fix a water line at a friend's home in Dallas.

"Everything's been freezing," Tuskey said. "I even had one in my own house ... of course I'm lucky I'm a plumber."

Tuskey, 49, said his plumbing business has had a stream of calls for help from friends and relatives with burst pipes. "I'm fixing to go help out another family member," he said. "I know she ain't got no money at all, but they ain't got no water at all, and they're older."

In Jackson, Mississippi, most of the city of about 161,000 lacked running water, and officials blamed city water mains that are more than 100 years old and not built for freezing weather.



New Braunfels Utility employees help package bottled water at the water station at the New Braunfels Civic/Convention Center in New Braunfels, Texas, on Friday, Feb. 19, 2021. The water stations were set up by New Braunfels Utilities and the city of New Braunfels for area residents without water in the wake of outages throughout the city due to unprecedented winter weather events. (Mikala Compton/Herald-Zeitung via AP)

The city was providing water for flushing toilets and drinking. But residents had to pick it up, leaving the elderly and those living on icy roads vulnerable.

Incoming and outgoing passenger flights at Memphis International Airport resumed Saturday after all flights were canceled Friday because of water pressure problems. The issues hadn't been resolved, but airport

officials set up temporary restroom facilities.

Prison rights advocates said some correctional facilities across Louisiana had intermittent electricity and frozen pipes, affecting toilets and showers.

The men who are sick, elderly or being held not in dormitories but in cell blocks—small spaces surrounded by concrete walls—were especially vulnerable, according to Voice of the Experienced, a grassroots organization founded and run by formerly incarcerated people. The group said one man at Elayn Hunt Correctional Center, just south of Baton Rouge, described a thin layer of ice on his walls.

Cammie Maturin said she spoke to men at the 6,300-inmate Louisiana State Penitentiary in Angola who were given no extra provisions to protect themselves from the cold.



Brian Bowen drags his friend Eric Andries down a street in Overton Park in Memphis, Tenn., Wednesday, Feb. 17, 2021. (Jim Weber/Daily Memphian via AP)

"They give them no extra blankets. No extra anything. For them, it's just been fend for yourself," said Maturin, president of the nonprofit H.O.P.E. Foundation.

In many areas, water pressure dropped after lines froze and because people left faucets dripping to prevent pipes from icing, authorities said.

As of Saturday, 1,445 [public water systems](#) in Texas had reported disrupted operations, said Toby Baker executive director of the state

Commission on Environmental Quality. Government agencies were using mobile labs and coordinating to speed water testing.

That's up from 1,300 reporting issues Friday afternoon. But Baker said the number of affected customers had dropped slightly. Most were under boil-water orders, with 156,000 lacking water service entirely.

"It seems like last night we may have seen some stabilization in the water systems across the state," Baker said.



A lone man walks down the center of a snowy Beale Street in Downtown Memphis, Tenn., Wednesday, Feb. 17, 2021. (Jim Weber/Daily Memphian via AP)

The Saturday thaw after 11 days of freezing temperatures in Oklahoma City left residents with burst water pipes, inoperable wells and furnaces knocked out of operation by brief power blackouts.

Rhodes College in Memphis said Friday that about 700 residential students were being moved to hotels in the suburbs of Germantown and Collierville after school bathrooms stopped functioning because of low water pressure.

Firefighters extinguished a blaze at a fully occupied 102-room hotel in Killeen, Texas, about 70 miles (110 kilometers) north of Austin, late Friday. The hotel's sprinkler system didn't work because of frozen pipes, authorities said Saturday.

Flames shot from the top of the four-story hotel, and three people required medical care. Displaced guests were taken to a nearby Baptist church.

Texas electrical grid operators said electricity transmission returned to normal after the historic snowfall and single-digit temperatures created a surge in demand that buckled the state's system.



City of Austin Water Utility worker Salvador Tinajero repairs a broken water main near 11th and Red River streets in Austin, Texas, on Friday, Feb. 19, 2021./ (Jay Janner/Austin American-Statesman via AP)



Water trickles from a fire hydrant while City of Austin Water Utility workers repair a broken water main near 11th and Red River streets in Austin, Texas, on Friday, Feb. 19, 2021./ (Jay Janner/Austin American-Statesman via AP)

Smaller outages remained, but Bill Magness, president of the Electric Reliability Council of Texas, said the grid now can provide power throughout the system.

Abbott ordered an investigation into the failure for a state known as the U.S. energy capital. ERCOT officials have defended their preparations and the decision to begin forced outages Monday as the grid reached breaking point.

The blackouts resulted in at least two lawsuits filed against ERCOT and

utilities, including one filed by the family of an 11-year-old boy who is believed to have died from hypothermia. The lawsuits claim ERCOT ignored repeated warnings of weaknesses in the state's power infrastructure.

Also, Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton issued civil investigative demands to ERCOT and electric utility companies. His investigation will address power outages, emergency plans, energy pricing and more related to the winter storm.

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