

# Virginia preps for more bad weather amid storm of questions

January 7 2022, by Sarah Rankin

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A snow plow pushes snow to the side of northbound Interstate 95 in Spotsylvania County, Va., on Tuesday, Jan. 4, 2022. Hundreds of motorists were stranded on Monday, after a winter storm snarled traffic in Virginia and left some drivers stuck in place for nearly 24 hours in freezing temperatures along an impassable stretch of Interstate 80 south of the nation's capital. (Tristan Lorei

With more bad weather looming, Virginia officials sought to reassure the public Thursday as they reacted to harsh criticism of their response to a snowstorm earlier this week that left hundreds of motorists stranded on Interstate 95 in frigid temperatures.

In contrast to his response to Monday's storm, Gov. Ralph Northam declared a [state of emergency](#) in advance of the wintry weather that is expected to move into the state late Thursday, and he asked the Virginia National Guard for assistance. The measures are necessary this time, his office said, because of the lingering effects of the first storm.

Northam also pushed back against the criticism, questioning why drivers were out in force on the highways when they had been warned to stay home, while some experts and officials from other states said they saw little Virginia could have done to prevent the logjam that occurred amid snowy conditions on I-95, the East Coast's longest north-south artery.

Secretary of Public Safety and Homeland Security Brian Moran told The Associated Press on Thursday that no one brought the escalating problems to the attention of the governor's Cabinet promptly on Monday. A county official eventually called him in the middle of the night.

Virginia officials have promised to review the state's response, though how exactly how they will do that is unclear. During an unusually detailed news briefing Thursday to discuss upcoming weather preparations, a Cabinet secretary suggested a joint investigation is possible; others have said each state agency would conduct its own inquiry.



Drivers wait for the traffic to be cleared as cars and trucks are stranded on sections of Interstate 95 Tuesday Jan. 4, 2022, in Carmel Church, Va. Close to 48 miles of the Interstate was closed due to ice and snow. Credit: AP Photo/Steve Helber

Similar investigations in other states have resulted in revamped alert systems, additional snow-clearing equipment and more aggressive road treatments.

In Virginia, state lawmakers, local officials, at least two members of Congress and the AAA auto club called for action. Stafford County Board of Supervisors Chair Crystal Vanuch, a Republican and lifelong county native, said Thursday that the gridlock was "probably the biggest disaster we've ever seen."

According to Vanuch, the county's emergency operations command received roughly 1,800 calls for service over a [24-hour period](#)—more than five times the normal amount—and local emergency workers told her they weren't getting the help they needed from state officials.

She said she called Moran at 1 a.m. Tuesday and that by daybreak, state officials had begun deploying resources, including helicopters to survey roads and see where the worst chokepoints existed.

Northam, a Democrat who leaves office later this month, said in an uncharacteristically combative interview Wednesday that he was "getting sick and tired of people talking about what went wrong."



Cars and trucks wait for traffic to clear after being stranded on sections of Interstate 95 Tuesday Jan. 4, 2022, in Stafford, Va. Close to 48 miles of the

Interstate was closed due to ice and snow. Credit: AP Photo/Steve Helber

He told radio station WRVA that no one was injured and that people should be thanking first responders and emergency workers.

In a conciliatory follow-up statement Thursday, Northam said he was trying to express his appreciation for police troopers and other workers who had put in 30 to 40 hours straight under difficult circumstances.

In the statement, he also said he had compassion for drivers who were stuck in a "scary situation" and reiterated his commitment to doing "everything possible to keep this from happening again."

Many motorists reported being offered little in the way of assistance while they were stuck in the traffic on I-95, which according to officials began Monday morning after a commercial vehicle jackknifed. As heavy, wet snow poured down, more cars and trucks became disabled, further tying up traffic and preventing plowing. Traffic eventually ground to a total halt, leaving some travelers stranded for over 24 hours.

Officials had said that pretreating the roads was not an option because the storm started as rain, which would have washed any brine-chemical solution away.



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Transportation experts and officials elsewhere acknowledged the difficulty.

"If we have an event that's going to start as rain and transition to snow, we do not pretreat, because it would be a waste of time and money," Ohio transportation department spokesperson Matt Bruning said

Wednesday.

Andy Alden, a transportation researcher at the Virginia Tech Transportation Institute, said from his perspective, the state did "everything just about right."

Recent high-profile traffic pileups in other states led to revamped systems that appeared to help stave off future catastrophes.

After a 2014 winter snowstorm crippled the Atlanta area with fewer than 3 inches (7.6 centimeters) of snow, stranding drivers in cars overnight and forcing children to sleep at their schools, the state devised a plan to alert residents more quickly of incoming winter storms, more than doubled its fleet of snow-clearing equipment and started keeping salt and gravel on hand in larger quantities.



Interstate 95 around mile marker 128 in Spotsylvania County, Va., is devoid of traffic on Tuesday, Jan. 4, 2022. Hundreds of motorists were stranded on Monday, after a winter storm snarled traffic in Virginia and left some drivers stuck in place for nearly 24 hours in freezing temperatures along an impassable stretch of Interstate 80 south of the nation's capital. (Tristan Lorei

In New Jersey, which regularly confronts winter weather on its highways, Democratic Gov. Phil Murphy faced numerous complaints after a 2018 snowstorm left drivers stuck on major highways. His predecessor, Republican Chris Christie, complained that it took him five hours to travel about 30 miles (48 kilometers).

Murphy has been known since to overprepare for storms, sending trucks to brine roadways ahead of storms that never materialize.

"I think it costs 17 cents a mile to brine the road, so if we become the brining state of America, I will not be upset about that," he said in 2019.

The COVID-19 pandemic has also made it harder in some states to assemble the workforce needed to plow roads. In Virginia, officials said they had enough employees, but at least one locality cited staffing shortages. Motorists also faced long delays on secondary roads while trying to avoid I-95.

Virginia State Police officials, who have long noted staffing challenges, said they increased the number of troopers assigned solely to the interstate to 30 on Tuesday, after starting Monday with about 18 in the entire area.





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Kiara Davis (left) and Aja Brown walk up the southbound I95 on ramp toward Route 234 in Dumfries, Va. on Tuesday, Jan. 4, 2022. The two brought a cooler with beverages and snacks for anyone they may have found stranded on the highway. Hundreds of motorists waited desperately for help Tuesday after a winter storm snarled traffic in Virginia and left some drivers stranded for nearly 24 hours in freezing temperatures along an impassable stretch of interstate south of the nation's capital. Credit: Peter Cihelka/The Free Lance-Star via AP

Ron Maxey, VSP's deputy director of field operations, said many troopers set out on foot to check on stranded motorists, and shared some of their own food.

Natalie Simpson, a professor and expert on emergency services at the University at Buffalo School of Management, said she didn't see any immediate evidence that Virginia officials missed a step that could have mitigated the traffic jam earlier this week. But Simpson said governments everywhere need to do a better job planning to provide aid to stranded drivers.

"Once traffic stops on an interstate, an interstate becomes a prison," she said.

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This story has been edited to correct that Northam's radio interview took place Wednesday, not Thursday.

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