

The Bandera PROPHEET

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Bandera Electric Cooperative explains some power shortages

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Since the onset of this winter blast, people continue to come to terms with the fact that they have experienced yet another historic event. Waking up to miles of fresh fallen snow may be awe-inspiring, however there is real danger lurking beneath the beauty.

After the temperatures plummeted Sunday as the arctic blast coasted into the Hill Country, the demands on the power grid skyrocketed. Thousands of people were left without power and heat, and the excitement of a snowy morning quickly transitioned to life-threatening concerns.

“When this storm really kicked in on Sunday the outages started picking up,” Bandera Electric Cooperative General Counsel John Padalino said. “Ice impacted power lines across the system.”

Padalino said line outages and the overwhelming demand created problems initially, and BEC equipment was impacted. Then BEC was ordered to begin rolling outages at 2 a.m. Monday. The mandate came down from ERCOT - the Electric Reliability Council of Texas - the “air-traffic controller” of the grid. Though ERCOT does not generate electricity, it is the platform electricity is exchanged on, and they issued a statewide order to reduce the load because there was not enough supply.

About 15 to 20 percent of Texas’ power supply is renewable - wind and solar. Coal and nuclear power also contribute, but the state’s main source of grid power is natural gas.

Texas leads the nation in natural gas consumption, accounting for almost 15 percent of the U.S. total, according to the U.S. Energy Information

Administration. Texas also leads the nation in wind-powered electricity generation, producing almost three-tenths of the U.S. total in 2019.

Blaming “frozen wind turbines, limited gas supplies, low gas pressure and frozen instrumentation,” ERCOT reported that approximately 185 generating units tripped offline Monday.

"We know millions of people are suffering," ERCOT President and CEO Bill Magness said in a press release issued today. "We have no other priority than getting them electricity. No other priority."

The press release further stated that “when the Midwest went into a power emergency of their own... ERCOT was no longer able to import approximately 600 MW.”

"Although we've reconnected more consumers back to the grid, the aggregate energy consumption of customers (those recently turned back on and those already on) is actually lower this morning compared to yesterday because it's less cold," ERCOT Senior Director of System Operations Dan Woodfin said. "However, we are anticipating another cold front this evening which could increase the demand. The ability to restore more power is contingent on more generation coming back online."

Padalino said previous to this week, the highest load locally was on Jan. 3, 2018, when usage peaked at 218 megawatts. Last Sunday at 10 p.m., the load was 273 megawatts, a 30 percent increase.

“It was a huge, huge demand on the system,” Padalino said.

He said that demand created a ripple effect down the east side of the county from Bandera to Pipe Creek, to Bridlegate and down to Medina Lake. Two substations were drained, and those have been the areas hardest hit.

“Some of those areas have had outages since Sunday,” Padalino said, adding some substations, such as the Mason Creek Substation, powers natural gas and has to stay on all the time.

“The men and women of BEC are doing everything they can. We're really fighting to help maintain the safety and reliability on the grid,” Padalino said.

Calling the rolling blackouts a mitigation effort to prevent a complete blackout, Padalino said the long-term problems some people are experiencing are because of the storm. He said linemen and other employees are working as hard as they can to restore power, often at their own peril. He said employees have also been impacted by the outages, and are working as quickly and safely as possible to restore service.

“We’re all doing what we can. We know people are frustrated. We hear them and we’re working tirelessly to get the lights on as fast as we can,” Padalino said.

At the end of this crisis, in anticipation of members who may have financial difficulties because of lost wages or higher bills due to increased usage at peak times, Padalino advised anyone struggling to pay their bill to reach out to BEC member relations.

“I’m sure we’ll have those discussions,” Padalino said in reference to what plans BEC has to help. “We’re going to do our best to take care of them.”