

Record heat, violent storms beleaguer US cities

150,000 in St. Louis still without power

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Record-breaking heat continues in widespread areas of the contiguous United States, which, combined in many cases with official neglect and mismanagement, has produced considerable misery and social disruption. Power outages and lack of air-conditioning have led to deaths in several cities.

Unusually high temperatures in the US have forced thousands without air conditioning to flock to makeshift cooling centers to avoid the soaring temperatures. Twenty-nine deaths have been attributed to the heat wave in recent days. Seven deaths have occurred in Chicago, mostly among the chronically ill and elderly. One elderly man's death in northern California was attributed to an air conditioning failure in the nursing home where he lived.

Four people died in St. Louis, Missouri after heavy rainstorms last week multiplied the debilitating effects of a heat wave that has gripped the metropolis.

A fifth victim in the St. Louis area, utility worker Robert Tackett, was electrocuted July 25 in a city suburb when he walked into brush where a live wire was hidden. Tackett, 56, a 13-year veteran at AmerenUE, who was working on restoring power to the more than 100,000 people still without electricity in the area, was killed instantly. Also on Tuesday, a contract worker with Kansas City-based Par Electric came into contact with an energized line in north St. Louis County. Hospitalized, he was expected to recover.

Every major metropolitan area west of the Rocky Mountains experienced record heat over the weekend. Phoenix, Arizona hit 114 degrees Fahrenheit (46 degrees Celsius) and Los Angeles 101 degrees (38C), while temperatures in Woodland Hills, California—a Los Angeles suburb—reached 119 degrees (48C) on Saturday. Rolling blackouts are expected in California as demand

for electricity spikes. The National Weather Service has issued a new excessive heat warning for California, with temperatures predicted to reach 111 degrees (44C).

Wildfires, fueled by the dry, hot conditions, continue to rage in a number of areas, particularly in rural parts of San Diego County in southern California and in the Tonto National Forest in Arizona, east of Phoenix. Fires have already devastated over 4.9 million acres in the US in 2006, considerably more than the 10-year annual average of 2.7 million acres. The National Interagency Fire Center reported July 24 that this fire season was on pace to be the worst of the decade.

Eastern cities have not escaped major power outages. Thousands of homes and businesses in the New York City borough of Queens have been without electricity for more than a week. (See "The Queens blackout: the brutal human costs of Con Ed's drive for profit").

St. Louis, in the country's mid-section, has been hardest hit by power outages. Nearly a week after summer storms punctuated a severe heat wave, some 150,000 residents were still without power Monday, out of a metropolitan area population of approximately two million people. The city has been declared a federal disaster area, and the governor has called out the National Guard.

The storms July 19 and July 21 did more than impact the electrical grid. Many homes, businesses, streets and roadways were damaged or covered in debris. Heavy rains, powerful winds of up to 80 miles per hour and lightning left behind neighborhoods with damaged buildings and houses due to fallen trees and branches, giving the appearance in certain areas of a war zone.

The first storm knocked out power to more than 500,000 Ameren customers; the second storm affected 200,000, including many whose power had barely been

restored.

The storms compounded the effects of the already deadly heat on area residents. Temperatures in the St. Louis area have been hovering around or above 100 degrees Fahrenheit. Temperatures for the year are above normal and are expected to remain so for the rest of the week, reaching the 90s until at least Friday.

Hospitals and nursing homes were evacuated the day after the first storm. On July 20, St. Louis City firefighters evacuated about a hundred senior citizens from an assisted living complex. The residents had been without power throughout the previous night. But scores of other frail individuals were simply left to fend for themselves, unable to get to one of only two shelters or 14 cooling centers available in the city. One family that stayed in their home suffered carbon monoxide poisoning from running a generator inside their home in the blacked-out city.

By July 21 many streets and subdivisions in St. Louis County appeared abandoned, as residents took shelter in the South County Mall and other nearby shops. Many store parking lots were near capacity by noon, and long lines of cars and trucks congested gas stations.

St. Louis, the 17th largest metropolitan area in the US and the third largest in the Midwest, has a poverty rate of nearly 21 percent. The official (and underestimated) unemployment rate is 10 percent. Those with the worst health complications disproportionately fall into the ranks of the poor, without financial means to remedy their situation, or even to avoid a weather-related disaster. The social chasm renders precarious the lives of large numbers of people living in poverty.

On Monday Ameren officials were dismissive of residents' desperate pleas for help. The utility company spokesperson said customers should have expected to wait three to five days for power to be restored.

The *St. Louis Post-Dispatch's* web site noted, "While many customers without power remain hopping mad, St. Louis Mayor Francis Slay and Missouri Gov. Matt Blunt offered only mild, if any, criticism of Ameren at a news conference Monday."

"They're under a lot of pressure. They'll remain under pressure to restore power," Blunt told the media. "We'll worry about any sort of after-action after power's been restored to everybody that was impacted." He added, "No response is perfect." Republican Senator Jim Talent also praised Ameren's recovery efforts.

The mayor of Bethalto, Illinois, however, across the Mississippi River from St. Louis, called for an inquiry

into Ameren's prioritizing of its efforts to restore power. Mayor Steve Bryant told the media that residents of his town weren't seeing Ameren trucks, and that on Monday morning, three-quarters of Bethalto residents were still without power.

In a nice touch, Ameren had applied to the Missouri Public Service Commission July 7 for an increase in basic rates for electric service. The filing included a proposed average increase in electric rates of 17.7 percent, with a limit on the increase to residential rates of 10 percent.

In St. Louis proper, with a population of 350,000, chaos was evident as last week's storms progressed. On the night of July 19, after the first storm hit, angry residents lined up at the few open gas stations. People scrambled for ice and drinks or anything else they might use to stay cool. Ice remains in short supply nearly a week after the blackout began. "Gas prices are going through the roof. Nobody's got electricity. There's not a single bag of ice in there. It's like the end of the world," resident James Burkett told the *Post-Dispatch* on Saturday.

While heat took the lives of two of the storm's victims, one death associated with the storms was attributed to a downed power line in a public housing complex in impoverished East St. Louis, Illinois on the morning of July 20. Chester Chapman, 50, was electrocuted while walking from his home in the complex to a nearby vocational school, according to St. Clair County Coroner Rick Stone.

The mayor of Cahokia, Illinois said at least 50 homes had trees on them. Without power in the city on Saturday, the sewage treatment plant was affected.

Many of the storm and heat-related problems in the Midwest, where tornadoes and thunderstorms are common, could be averted if efforts were made to replace antiquated above-ground power lines with an underground system, thus ensuring their safety in violent storms.

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