

ONE HUNDRED SEVENTEENTH CONGRESS
Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
COMMITTEE ON ENERGY AND COMMERCE
2125 RAYBURN HOUSE OFFICE BUILDING
WASHINGTON, DC 20515-6115

Majority (202) 225-2927
Minority (202) 225-3641

February 19, 2021

The Honorable Greg Abbott
Governor
Office of the Texas Governor
1100 Congress Avenue
Austin, TX 78701

Dear Governor Abbott:

We write to express serious concern over the handling of the winter weather crisis that continues to keep Texas in the dark and threatens the health and safety of millions of Texans.

Beginning Sunday, February 14, 2021, winter storms brought life-threatening low temperatures along with snow and freezing rain throughout much of Texas, leading to hazardous travel conditions, power outages, and fatalities. According to reports, there have been at least ten weather-related fatalities in Texas since Sunday resulting from carbon monoxide poisoning, fire, cold temperatures, or car accidents.¹ Millions of other Texans have suffered without reliable heat, power, or safe drinking water, with nearly 12 million people reportedly being advised to boil water for safety at one point² and water supply shortages risking the health of patients at Austin-area hospitals.³ More than 4.3 million customers lost power during peak outages,⁴ with historically marginalized and low-income communities among the first to lose power, according to experts.⁵ On top of this, the imbalance between energy supply and demand also pushed

¹ *Millions Without Water, Power as Death Toll Rises in Winter Storms*, The Weather Channel (Feb. 18, 2021).

² *Texas weather: Residents told to boil tap water amid power blackouts*, BBC News (Feb. 18, 2021).

³ *Austin-area hospitals respond after reports of water outages, employees using bags for restroom purposes*, KVUE ABC (Feb. 17, 2021).

⁴ *The status and politics of the Texas power crisis*, Axios (Feb. 16, 2021).

⁵ *Texas Blackouts Hit Minority Neighborhoods Especially Hard*, The New York Times (Feb. 16, 2021).

electricity prices from \$20 up to \$9,000 per megawatt hour, the consequences of which could further adversely affect Texans even after power and other utilities are restored.⁶

As the crisis continued and Texans suffered from widespread blackouts, you made questionable statements as to the causes of the widespread power failures. On Tuesday, you stated that “[o]ur wind and our solar got shut down, and they were collectively more than 10 percent of our power grid, and that thrust Texas into a situation where it was lacking power on a statewide basis. ... It just shows that fossil fuel is necessary.”⁷ However, the Electric Reliability Council of Texas (ERCOT) clarified that “a lot of the generation that has gone offline today has been primarily due to issues on the natural gas system.”⁸ These statements either suggest a lack of understanding of the Texas power grid’s fundamental operations or were an attempt to shift blame away from the very real issues that have existed within the state’s energy structure for years.

The response to this ongoing crisis raises significant questions regarding Texas’ grid design, preparation, and whether the state is taking appropriate action to aid citizens in this crisis. Texas’ grid limits interconnection with other states, such that Texas is unable to import significant amounts of power when in-state supply is threatened.⁹ A 2011 report by the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC) and the North American Electric Reliability Corporation (NERC) reviewed the causes of massive power failures during a cold weather event that year and made a number of recommendations for the electric and natural gas industries intended to help prevent blackouts and natural gas curtailments.¹⁰ With scientists predicting that extreme weather events could become more frequent in the future due to climate change, it is critical that Texas and other states apply lessons from earlier emergency events in order to increase the strength and resiliency of the grid and prevent future blackouts.

The Committee, which has broad jurisdiction over energy policy, has a longstanding interest in ensuring that all Americans are served by an affordable, reliable, and clean energy infrastructure. The events of this week demonstrate that there are significant shortcomings in preparations and more must be done to protect communities disproportionately impacted by winter power outages. We are concerned that the underlying issues that contributed to the 2011

⁶ *Why the power grid failed in Texas and beyond*, The Los Angeles Times (Feb. 18, 2021).

⁷ *Rick Perry says Texans would accept even longer power outages ‘to keep the federal government out of their business,’* The Washington Post (Feb. 18, 2021).

⁸ *Greg Abbott Blames Texas Power Outages on Green Energy but State Depends on Gas*, Newsweek (Feb. 17, 2021).

⁹ *How the Texas power grid failed and what could stop it from happening again*, CNBC (Feb. 17, 2021).

¹⁰ Federal Energy Regulatory Commission, *Report on Outages and Curtailments During the Southwest Cold Weather Event of February 1-5, 2011: Causes and Recommendations* (Aug. 16, 2011).

massive power failure have not been fully addressed. We, therefore, respectfully request a response to the following:

1. What is the timeline for restoring power in all areas of the State, and what steps are being taken to ensure that power will remain available once restored? Please also explain any additional measures in place to ensure reliable power is restored as soon as possible to historically marginalized and low-income communities.
2. What is the current number of fatalities linked to winter storm events which began February 14, 2021, and how many of those fatalities were in whole or in part connected to loss of electric power or access to safe drinking water?
3. What is your current understanding of how different sources of power generation performed during this event?
4. Please explain whether increased connection with the Eastern and Western Interconnections in the United States would have allowed Texas to import more power to alleviate the electricity shortages experienced within the State.
5. What is the power supply and operational status of critical infrastructure facilities in the State? Your response should include the number of facilities without power, with power, and operating on auxiliary power for hospitals, public drinking water and wastewater treatment systems, and chemical facilities.
6. Please describe any existing emergency protocols that were in place to ensure regular communication with ERCOT, upstream and downstream oil and gas operators, and any other relevant energy infrastructure operators. How regularly were you or others in your office in communication with these groups? What type of information was shared?
7. As noted above, a 2011 winter weather event led to statewide power failures and a subsequent report by FERC and NERC made several recommendations for improving the resiliency of Texas' energy infrastructure. Please explain how, if at all, Texas required energy providers to adopt or implement these recommendations. Please also provide an explanation as to why Texas failed to mandate the recommended upgrades.
8. You have called for an investigation into ERCOT.¹¹ If you proceed with an investigation, what authorities are the basis for your request? Please define the scope of that investigation and whether it will include any formal recommendations on how to prevent such an event from reoccurring. Please also identify the entities responsible for the investigation, explain their jurisdiction and authorities, and identify any measures in place that will ensure that the investigation is independent and adequately resourced.

¹¹ *Power restored to 2 million homes in Texas; death toll tops 30*, The Washington Post (Feb. 19, 2021).

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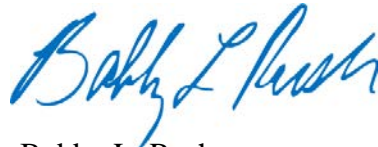
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We request that you provide the following information as soon as practicable in light of ongoing circumstances, but no later than March 22, 2021. Thank you in advance for your cooperation.

Sincerely,



Frank Pallone, Jr.
Chairman



Bobby L. Rush
Chairman
Subcommittee on Energy



Diana DeGette
Chair
Subcommittee on Oversight
and Investigations



Marc A. Veasey
Member of Congress



Lizzie Fletcher
Member of Congress

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cc: The Honorable Cathy McMorris Rodgers
Ranking Member
Committee on Energy and Commerce

The Honorable Fred Upton
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Energy

The Honorable Morgan Griffith
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations