

Committee on Energy and Commerce

**Opening Statement as Prepared for Delivery
of**

Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations Chair Diana DeGette

Hearing on “Power Struggle: Examining the 2021 Texas Grid Failure”

March 24, 2021

Last month’s extreme weather event in Texas triggered a crisis of an enormous scale and took a staggering toll on Texans.

While state and federal officials are working to determine exactly why the electric grid failed, some of the contributing factors are already becoming clear.

For instance, we know that power sources were not adequately winterized. This caused the power supply to falter just as consumers were demanding more electricity to counter the cold as the storm swept across Texas.

To preserve the stability of the system, the grid’s operator initiated power outages to reduce energy demand—reportedly avoiding a cascading blackout by mere minutes. Outages that were supposed to be temporary ended up lasting for days.

As many as 4 million customers lost power, and many more struggled to get food or access to safe drinking water. At one point, as estimated 14 million people were under boil water notices. Even hospitals had to make do with limited water and power.

Tragically, people resorted to dangerous and sometimes fatal methods to stay warm. At least 57 Texans lost their lives—some dying from carbon monoxide poisoning or hypothermia in their own homes.

And though power has been restored, life has not returned to normal for many in the state. Many Texans are now confronting the extensive damage caused by water pipes that froze, ruptured, and flooded homes and businesses.

Adding further misery, the crisis also wreaked havoc on the price of electricity, with prices soaring to the maximum permitted under state law. This left many Texans with sky-high power bills, some totaling in the thousands for a few days of power.

And while the storm impacted millions, this event appears to have been particularly harmful to many low-income individuals. Those without resources are often hit hardest by disasters, as many lack even a basic financial safety net to endure the event or recover.

The massive scope of economic harm to Texas, while still coming into focus, could be as high as nearly \$300 billion dollars, which is more than Hurricanes Harvey and Ike combined.

Unfortunately, weather events like this are no longer a surprise.

Each year, we seem to break new climate records and see more frequent extreme weather events. Catastrophic storms, floods, and fires, once considered rare, have become routine.

The Houston region—as Mayor Turner will tell us—has faced multiple catastrophic weather events over a very short period, including Hurricane Harvey, which inundated the city with more than 51 inches of rain.

In the Mountain West, wildfires are larger, and the wildfire season goes longer. In California, wildfires have resulted in widespread power outages, a topic on which we held a hearing on in January 2020.

In Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands, Hurricanes Irma and Maria in 2017 caused unprecedented devastation and the longest electricity blackout in U.S. history.

Mr. Griffith and I traveled to that region with many of our colleagues to examine the impacts those storms had on the islands' health care system and electricity grid—an issue we held a hearing on in April of 2018.

These are just some of the more recent extreme weather events. As the Energy and Commerce Committee, it is our duty to examine crises like these and explore ways to prevent the massive damages they are causing.

Hearings like we are having today are crucial if we are going to learn to adapt to a changing climate and increase the resiliency of our nation's power grid. What happened in Texas makes clear that extreme weather events can affect all forms of energy, including coal, wind, natural gas, and even nuclear.

And while our focus today is rightfully on Texas, the testimony we will hear will also provide insights applicable to reliability risks in other parts of the country.

Which brings me to my broadest point. The key lesson from what happened in Texas is that extreme weather events are devastating—and happening more frequently. We need to accept this fact and prepare.

We must quit kicking this can down the road.

Adapting and confronting a changing climate will not come cheap or come easy. But if we do nothing, we will only continue to incur huge losses in human lives, property damage, and threats to our power supply.

Climate change is here, and we need to recognize this reality by taking action to ensure our electric grids are designed with the resiliency and reliability needed in a climate-changed world.

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So, let me conclude by thanking our witnesses for being here today. Let me also take a moment to recognize the leadership of two of my colleagues, Representative Fletcher and Representative Veasey, who have been tireless advocates for their constituents throughout this crisis.

I look forward to hearing from our witnesses today. Thank you.