

# *Rising Frustration in Houston After Millions Lost Power in Storm*

With outages expected to last days, a top state official promised to look into whether the utility company could have done more to prepare for Hurricane Beryl.



**By J. David Goodman and Ivan Penn**

Reporting from Houston and Los Angeles.

July 10, 2024 Updated 12:12 p.m. ET

**Sign up for Your Places: Extreme Weather.** Get notified about extreme weather before it happens with custom alerts for places in the U.S. you choose. [Get it sent to your inbox.](#)

The sun felt hotter than usual in Houston this week, as millions of sweltering residents emerged from the rapid thrashing of Hurricane Beryl to face a prolonged power outage — the largest ever seen by the city’s utility, according to the state’s lieutenant governor.

The outages from the storm affected as many as 2.7 million customers across the state, mostly in and around Houston. Despite a promise by the utility, CenterPoint Energy, to restore power to one million customers by the end of the day on Wednesday, large swaths of the nation’s fourth-biggest city remained without power.

The scale of the outages raised questions about whether enough had been done to prepare the city, just 50 miles from the Gulf Coast, for the kinds of storms that climate scientists predict will arrive with greater frequency.

“For a Category 1 hurricane to result in over a million customer outages in its immediate aftermath demonstrates that there is plenty of need for the resiliency hardening investments,” said Wei Du, an energy expert with PA Consulting and a former senior analyst and engineer for Con Edison.

Beryl was not a particularly strong storm when it made landfall early Monday. But the hurricane struck at the heart of Houston with a ferocity that toppled trees into power lines and that knocked over 10 transmission towers, officials said.

By late Tuesday, some 1.5 million of CenterPoint’s customers still had no power — and little sense of when it would return. Neighbors reported flickerings of light to each other on group chats, hoping for signs of progress. Many shared a map of open Whataburger locations, suggesting that the fast-food chain was a better way to find out about available electricity service, compared with the spotty information released by the utility.

As the temperatures rose, so did many residents’ anger.

“The response has been too slow,” said Patricia Alexander, 79, who sat in a cooling center in northwest Houston to get a break from the heat inside the senior center where she lives. “The mayor said he was looking out for senior centers and that CenterPoint’s teams were prioritizing senior facilities, but I don’t believe it, because we don’t have air-conditioning.”



About 2.2 million customers — 80 percent of the utility’s customers in the Houston area — lost power in the storm, a CenterPoint Energy spokesman said. Meridith Kohut for The New York Times

The sheer number of damaged lines accounted for the extent of the outages, which surpassed those during Hurricane Ike in 2008. After that storm, the utility described making efforts to better manage the vegetation around power lines.

Company officials said they had been surprised by the behavior of the storm, which initially was expected to strike further south but instead hit near Matagorda, Texas, after strengthening somewhat and then spiraling north toward Houston.

“No one should have been surprised,” said Dan Patrick, the state’s lieutenant governor, who has been acting in place of Gov. Greg Abbott while he travels abroad.

Mr. Patrick said in a news conference that he wanted the utility to focus on restoring power, but that afterward the company would need to explain its preparations for the storm.

“If they made mistakes beforehand, then that will be addressed,” Mr. Patrick said. “The real question is: Were they as prepared as they should be? And that’s up to them to answer, and they will answer not only to the public but to the P.U.C.,” he added, referring to the state’s Public Utility Commission.

Texas officials have spent much of the past few years worrying about the vulnerability of the state’s power grid to extreme cold after a failure during a winter storm in 2021.

But amid increasingly frequent extreme heat, the grid has also been tested in the summer, not just during storms but also on hot, cloudless days when energy demand is high.

“It’s not just during a storm: Texas in general tends to have more outages on a blue sky day than other states,” said Doug Lewin, an energy consultant and the author of the Texas Energy and Power newsletter. “We rank very poorly compared to other states. We’ve got a long way to go.”

In CenterPoint’s last three annual reports to federal regulators, including the most recent one in February, the utility said it had risks related to aging facilities. “Aging infrastructure may complicate our utility operations’ ability to address climate change concerns and efforts to enhance resiliency and reliability,” the company told the Securities and Exchange Commission.

A spokeswoman for CenterPoint said that the company had monitored Beryl’s development and had prepared, but “a lot of the issues were just purely because the hurricane hit more intensely than we expected.”

In particular, the company said, many of the outages occurred after trees fell on power lines.



“While we tracked the projected path, intensity and timing for Hurricane Beryl closely for many days, this storm proved the unpredictability of hurricanes as it delivered a powerful blow across our service territory and impacted a lot of lives,” Lynnae Wilson, senior vice president for CenterPoint, said in a statement.

About 2.2 million customers — 80 percent of the utility’s customers in the Houston area — lost power in the storm, a company spokesman said.

Utility experts said that power companies have little excuse for not being ready for events that develop over the course of days, in particular when the primary job is to deliver safe, reliable service.

“Most of all, it really is the preparation issue,” said Robert McCullough, of McCullough Research, a consulting firm based in Portland, Ore. “Mild storm. Why weren’t we better prepared?”



The outages from Beryl came less than two months after powerful thunderstorms knocked out power across Houston in May. Daniel Becerril/Reuters

In April, CenterPoint filed a resiliency plan with the state, proposing to spend billions to “modernize and harden our existing infrastructure” to increase reliability. A significant focus, according to the plan, is to modernize the company’s transmission and distribution systems.

After a series of powerful hurricanes struck Florida two decades ago, that state took steps to improve its electrical infrastructure.

The process, which included burying a targeted number of power lines, appeared to bear fruit, according to a 2024 report by the Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory. The power grid grew more resilient to storms, the report found.

But simply burying power lines underground is not always the best solution, experts say, particularly in areas that are prone to flooding, like many parts of Houston.

“In areas where you worry more about water, you can end up making the system more vulnerable and more expensive when you underground,” said Ted Kury, director of energy studies for the Public Utility Research Center at the University of Florida. “Storm hardening is often a choice between what type of damage you’re more concerned about,” he added.

If it’s water, you go aboveground and accept the wind damage, he said, and “if it’s wind, you might want to underground” but would then have to worry about the water.

The \$2.19 billion investment plan proposed by CenterPoint includes upgrading or replacing existing poles and structures to meet current wind loading standards, and improving the distribution system to prevent automatic shut-offs. The plan also proposes a pilot program to assess whether “utility-scale” microgrids can speed up the restoration of power during a fire or weather emergency.

The plan, which still needs state approval, calls for making these investments over a three-year period from 2025 to 2027.

A committee of the Texas Legislature was set to meet on Monday in Austin to discuss the utility resiliency issue — but the meeting was canceled because of the storm.

Delay is becoming more costly. Greenhouse gas emissions are increasing the capacity of the atmosphere to hold moisture, leading to more rain, more flooding and more potential for trees to fall, said Karthik Balaguru, a researcher at the Pacific Northwest National Laboratory. “I think Houston is an area that we should expect more outages,” he said.

The outages from Beryl came less than two months after powerful thunderstorms knocked out power across Houston in May. Hundreds of thousands of residents lost power in that storm, and many of the same people found themselves again dumping spoiled food and looking for cool air this week.

“This is a double whammy,” said Cleveland James, 70, of West Houston, describing the almost back-to-back storms as he sat in the local cooling center. “I lost power for five days. So that doesn’t give me much encouragement that it will come back soon. I think it’ll take a week.”

Ms. Alexander, nearby, said she worried that Beryl would not be the last time she found herself without power this summer.

“This is going to happen again,” she said of the storm, only the second to get a name this hurricane season. “I mean, we’re only in the B’s.”

Shannon Sims contributed reporting from Houston.

**J. David Goodman** is the Houston bureau chief for The Times, reporting on Texas and Oklahoma. More about J. David Goodman

**Ivan Penn** is a reporter based in Los Angeles and covers the energy industry. His work has included reporting on clean energy, failures in the electric grid and the economics of utility services. More about Ivan Penn