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Extreme cold: Hydro-Québec ran out of power for Boston

The state-owned company suspended its exports to New England, which was forced to turn to polluting oil-fired power plants.



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Hydro-Québec cut power to New England just one week after commissioning a new transmission line built at a cost of \$2 billion.

On Saturday afternoon, the state-owned utility stopped supplying electricity to the NECEC line and only restarted it at full capacity on Monday evening. It then reduced supply twice on Tuesday before interrupting it again for more than two hours on Wednesday morning.

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In fact, Quebec was more of a net importer of electricity from New England during this period.

Hydro usually exports 1100 megawatts (MW) through the NECEC line, which was put into service on January 16.



Like much of Canada and the United States, the city of Boston has been hit by a snowstorm and a cold snap in recent days. Photo AFP

Quebec first

As a reminder, the temperature plummeted below -20°C on Saturday before rising slightly. Electricity demand in Quebec exceeded 40,000 MW several times on Saturday and Sunday. Cold weather is expected to continue until Friday evening.

"During peak periods, the needs of our customers in Quebec are prioritized," Hydro-Québec spokesperson Lynn St-Laurent told the *Journal*.

"Generally speaking, contracts contain clauses allowing for a reduction or absence of delivery in certain circumstances, such as during a peak period," she added.

Penalties?

Ms. St-Laurent assured that Hydro had not paid "any penalties" in connection with the suspension of electricity deliveries in recent days.

"According to the terms of the contract, events like the one over the weekend may exempt us from potential penalties," she explained.



Lynn St-Laurent Photo LinkedIn

That is not what the Massachusetts government supports.

"Hydro-Québec risks heavy penalties for each day it does not supply electricity to Massachusetts," Maria Hardiman, spokeswoman for the Massachusetts Executive Office of Energy and Environmental Affairs, told the specialized media outlet E&E News.

"It's very complicated and there will be a whole debate about it, I think, before it's cleared up," said Robert McCullough, an energy consultant for McCullough Research, during a telephone interview.

Polluting power plants

To replace Quebec's electricity, New England had to turn to fossil fuel power plants. These plants even abandoned natural gas, whose prices skyrocketed this weekend, in favor of fuel oil, which is even more polluting.

The region's energy producers, who fought in vain against the construction of Hydro's new line, deplored the sudden suspension of deliveries from Quebec.

The contract with Hydro is "very expensive for a product that is primarily used outside of peak winter periods," Don Dolan, president of the New England Electric Power Producers Association, told E&E News.

Hydro has very little room for maneuver

The marked drop in water levels in Hydro-Québec's reservoirs means that the Crown corporation has very little room for maneuver this winter.

Last week, Hydro had a margin of 443 megawatts (MW), barely 1.1% of the projected peak demand of 40,500 MW. This calculation comes from a report published in December by the Northeast Power Coordinating Council (NPCC), an organization that includes Quebec, Ontario, the Maritimes, New York State and New England.

This is the smallest margin for maneuver since at least 2019. It is also the smallest in all of Northeast North America, notes Robert McCullough, energy consultant for McCullough Research.

Therefore, "exports on the [new] NECEC line are frequently reduced in order to avoid interrupting the supply to Hydro-Québec customers," he said.



The new electricity transmission line connecting Quebec to Boston. Photo provided by Iberdrola

prolonged drought

“Hydro-Québec’s public statements were very optimistic, but we know the reality is a little different,” adds Mr. McCullough. “The drought [in James Bay] has lasted for three years now, and there are some indications that it could continue for a fourth year.”

This week, the NPCC's estimated margin for maneuver is only slightly higher: 1.7%. The good news is that it will rise above 5% as early as next week, according to the organization's projections.

Contract with Massachusetts

- Energy exported: 9.45 terawatt-hours/year
- Power: 1200 MW
- Duration: 20 years
- Price per year 1: 5.15¢ US/kWh (7¢ CAD)
- Price in year 20: 8.24¢ US/kWh
- Average price over the entire 20-year period: 6.5 US cents/kWh
- Deliveries begin: January 16, 2026