

# The Dallas Morning News

## Texas Gov. Greg Abbott says lawmakers must require weatherization of power plants - and pay for it

Though more power is coming back as the electric grid stabilizes, water system problems persist statewide.

*By Allie Morris, Robert T. Garrett and James Barragán - February 18, 2021*

AUSTIN -- Gov. Greg Abbott is calling on lawmakers to mandate and fund winterization of the state's power system, after frigid conditions knocked generators offline and left millions of Texans shivering in the dark this week.

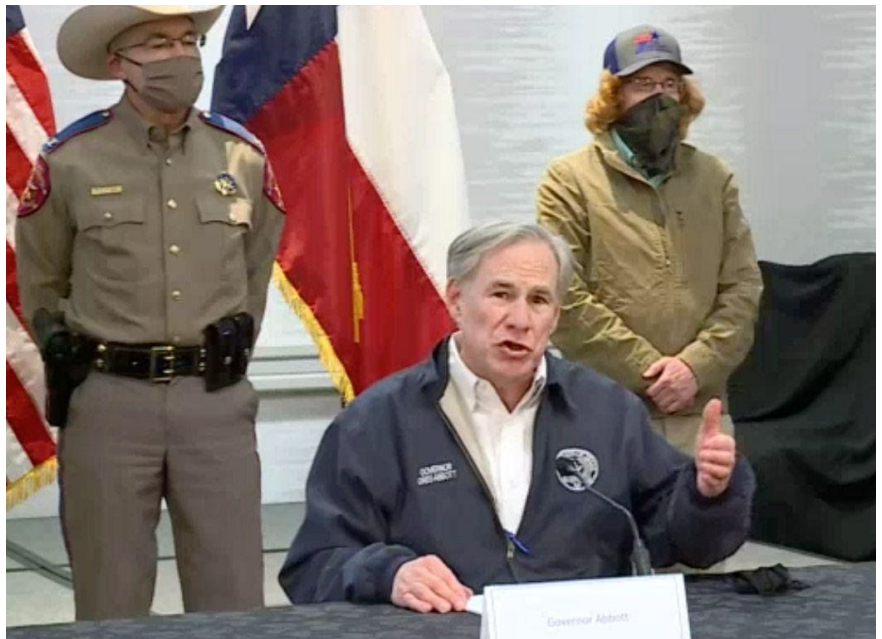
The Republican governor announced Thursday he's making the issue an emergency item, which means the Legislature can move faster on it in this year's session.

"Everyone knows how challenging the past few days have been for our fellow Texans," Abbott said. "All of us in the state of Texas believe it is completely unacceptable that you had to endure one minute of the challenge that you faced."

While power has been restored to nearly 2 million homes across Texas, about 325,000 people remain in the dark, Abbott said. Their lack of electricity largely stems from downed power lines or disconnections.

"There are no outages of power across the state of Texas because of lack of generation," said Abbott, who also warned of coming cold temperatures in several regions of the state overnight.

But even as the lights come back on, water outages are proving a major problem. About 13 million Texans -- more than a third of the state's population -- are under orders to boil their



Texas Governor Greg Abbott speaks during a press conference on Wednesday, February 17, 2021 in Austin.(KXAS-TV / (NBC5))

water, according to Toby Baker, executive director of the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality.

Of about 7,000 public drinking water systems in the state, 797 have “some sort of issue” -- broken pipes, lack of electricity, high demand -- because of the weather and power outages, Baker said. The agency is bringing in outside help to test samples over the coming days and considering additional waivers of state rules that might speed restoration of people’s water.

Large institutions such as hospitals have lost water, creating a major challenge, said Nim Kidd, chief of the Texas Division of Emergency Management.

Kidd said he spoke Thursday with his counterparts in Sunbelt states from Florida to California, and to the Federal Emergency Management Agency. Many are “offering assistance that will be coming this way,” he said. But Texans should continue to conserve water, he said.

“We’re working with our local partners, our private sector partners and FEMA to push additional water to every county in the state of Texas right now,” Kidd said.

Abbott had harsh words for The Electric Reliability Council of Texas, which oversees the power grid. Despite assurances by the council that there’d be “enough power to meet peak demand this winter,” none of that proved true, Abbott said.

“What happened this week to our fellow Texans is absolutely unacceptable and can never be replicated again,” he said.

However, he didn’t spank his appointees at the Public Utility Commission of Texas, which has some oversight responsibility. Looking past the current crisis, Abbott concluded, “From a longer term perspective as governor of Texas, I want to ensure this never happens again.”

It’s not the first time the state’s power grid has been unprepared facing extreme weather.

A winter storm in 2011 knocked power generators offline and prompted rolling blackouts in the state. Lawmakers responded by passing [a bill requiring the state](#) to track and report how well prepared the state’s electric grid is for extreme weather.



“While the issues that are plaguing our electric grid system in this disastrous winter storm are complex, I am extremely frustrated that 10 years later our electric grid remains so ill-equipped for these weather events,” Comptroller Glenn Hegar, who authored the bill a decade ago when he was a Republican state senator, [told The Dallas Morning News earlier this week.](#)

Instead of “heavy-handed regulations,” Texas relies on market incentives to coax power producers into things like winterizing, said Michael Webber, a professor of mechanical engineering and the Josey Centennial professor in energy resources at the University of Texas at Austin.

“Weatherization costs money, but you can make it back when the grid goes down and you’re making a ton of money because you can sell electrons,” he said.

The fact that so many operators were knocked offline by the winter weather suggests the financial incentives were not attractive enough or the cost-benefit analysis did not show the investments were worth it, Webber said. While generators of all kinds tripped offline, the majority were thermal sources, including natural gas, coal and nuclear, [according to ERCOT officials.](#)

“What it looks to me like is the cost-benefit analysis power generators did, they did not include an epic winter storm,” he said,

“which is a comprehensive failure across the nation in general, not to consider climate change in the calculations.”

It’s not clear what legislation Abbott has in mind. He asked the Legislature to “mandate the winterization of generators and the power system.” And he called for the “funding needed to ensure this winterization and modernization occurs.”

Abbott said he’s already been in multiple discussions with Republican leadership, including Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick and Speaker Dade Phelan. Lawmakers are scheduled to hold hearings, beginning next week, to [examine what happened.](#)

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Texans must ask their \*elected leaders\* these 4 questions:

**ERCOT Oversight and Governance**

The diagram shows the following structure:

- Texas Legislature
- Public Utility Commission (connected to Texas Governor)
- ERCOT Board of Directors
- Technical Advisory Committee
- Subcommittees: Retail Market Subcommittee, Wholesale Market Subcommittee, Reliability & Operations Subcommittee, Commercial Operations Subcommittee, Protocol Revisions Subcommittee
- Numerous Working Groups & Task Forces

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Asked whether his campaign contributions from the oil and gas industry mean Texans should be wary of his vows to improve energy generation and be a fair broker of the competing interests involved, Abbott said he's more beholden to ordinary homeowners than to big corporations.

"I received even more help from residential property owners and people who live in residences that

I've been working around the clock to help," said Abbott, who as of Dec. 31 had \$37.9 million of cash in his campaign account.

Shortly before Abbott's news conference, the **Texas IAF Networks**, a group of interfaith service groups across the state who serve more than 1 million people in nine regions, called on him to take responsibility for the "gross negligence" that led to this week's power outages across the state and "stop the finger pointing."

Rev. John Ogletree, of First Metropolitan Baptist Church in Houston, said after the 2011 storm, the state had learned that it needed to better prepare for extreme winter conditions. But it failed to follow through, he said.

"We're calling for the governor, spend the money and ... 'winterize' all of this grid," Ogletree said. "It's already figured out. Let's get in there."

