

Storm Eowyn brings Ireland's rural electricity distribution to near collapse

Steve James
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Two people in Ireland were killed by January's Storm Eowyn. A 20-year-old Polish man, Kacper Dudek, was killed in County Donegal when a falling tree struck his car. Days later, while electricity was still out and essential medical equipment not functioning, an elderly man died in front of his family in County Mayo. Another young driver was killed in Scotland.

Thus far, no other fatalities have been reported, but the storm's impact has been profound, particularly in the West of Ireland, exposing the near collapse of the island's rural electricity distribution system, its vulnerability to intense storms, one of the consequences of global warming.

At the peak of the "storm of the century" 750,000 premises in the Republic of Ireland and 250,000 in Northern Ireland had no power.

One day later, according to the Irish government's National Emergency Co-ordination Group, some 460,000 households were still without electricity. 200,000 were without water, another 300,000 were at risk of losing their water supply. 281,000 landline telephone customers had no services as did 1,760,000 mobile phone users. Nearly a fortnight later, some 18,000 rural houses still have no power, with reconnection times still measured in days due to extensive damage to power lines and infrastructure. In the North, one week after the storm, 6,500 premises still had no power, although most have now been reconnected.

Hundreds of skilled workers were mobilised from across Europe to assist in efforts to restore power across the island, while emergency generators were sourced with the European Union's Civil Protection Mechanism, including 10 generators from Poland.

In the storm's immediate aftermath over 300 emergency centres offering heat, hot food, showers,

charging services and telephones were opened. Many families were forced to drive miles to find something to eat, while less mobile isolated, vulnerable and elderly people were deprived of heat, light, water and any communication with the outside world for days.

Many of the emergency centres, particularly in the Northwest, remain open. Residents in County Kildare told the *Irish Times* of their concerns over elderly residents in the Broadford estate, trapped for days with no contact from either the local authorities or the ESB power provider. Over the course of the outages, emergency calls could not be made, vital medical equipment stopped working, cash could not be accessed.

According to Met Éireann, the storm was among the most powerful to ever hit Ireland. Hurricane force winds hit a number of locations, including Mace Head, in County Galway where one gust reached 184 kilometres per hour and sustained wind speeds, lasting over 10 minutes, of 142 kilometres per hour were recorded. Record speeds were also recorded in Finner, Athenry and Gurteen. Offshore, a weather buoy recorded a wave height of over 20 metres.

The storm, the fifth in a turbulent season which started in September, was driven by cold air displaced to the North East of the US meeting warmer tropical air. The intersection of the two, combined with a fast-moving transatlantic jet stream, resulted in a sudden collapse in atmospheric pressure, high wind speeds and a localised "sting jet" air system near where the highest wind speeds were recorded.

While temperatures during the storm were not unusual for the time of year, the European Union's Copernicus Climate Change Service reported last week that this January has been the warmest ever recorded globally, averaging 13.23 degrees centigrade (1.75

degrees above pre-industrial levels). One of the recognised consequences of global warming is that storms when they occur will be more powerful, more damaging and more frequent.

Estimates of the cost to insurers of repairing the damage to houses, sports centres, churches and public buildings are currently running to around €200 million, based on estimates and claims received to January 31 by Irish insurers. Many houses have had roofs blown off and been damaged by falling trees to compound the impact of power failures. Connacht Airdome, reportedly the largest indoor sports dome in the world, was destroyed. Estimates of the insurance costs across Europe ranged as high as €1 billion, reflecting the storm's impact beyond Ireland, particularly in the UK and Spain. In Ireland, a limited, means tested, compensation scheme is being rolled out.

The most striking aspect of the storm's impact was the damage to Ireland's electricity system. While Ireland is a magnet for global investment, headquartering many US tech companies, the power supply to the working population in rural areas is primitive. According to the ESB, domestic electricity distribution depends on as many as 2.1 million wooden poles and 150,000 kilometres of overhead power lines. 242,000 transformers are pole mounted. By contrast, only 22,000 km of power distribution lines are underground.

This is why Storm Eowyn was so damaging to power distribution. Eleven percent of Ireland's surface area is covered by trees. Many of these are close to overhead distribution lines serving the small villages, housing clusters and isolated dwellings that make up a high proportion of the rural housing stock. The combination of poorly maintained power lines, downed trees, many in poorly maintained plantations, makes for widespread service failures and slow and dangerous reconnection. Drone video footage in Newbridge, County Galway, showing an isolated house surrounded by acres of flattened conifers, highlighted the problem. ESB Networks, which owns all the distribution infrastructure, report that some 3,000 poles need to be replaced and 900km of cabling needs to be laid immediately. Only in December, Storm Darragh forced the replacement of 290km of power lines and 1,000 wooden poles after 440,000 customers lost power.

The extent of damage testifies to a sustained refusal

to invest in the necessary underground lines or ground clearance projects to build robust distribution system when the inevitable and frequent storms occur.

The recently installed Taoiseach (prime minister of Ireland), Fianna Fail's Micheál Martin, complained in a Dáil debate on the storm that investment in the electricity grid would have to increase from €5 billion to €13 billion over the coming five years. Martin declined to outline specific measures other than safety corridors around the distribution grid.

In the debate, not one of the assembled delegates mentioned the 82 data centres the country is currently hosting. While data centres are a necessary part of the modern world—used for storing data and with Artificial Intelligence vastly increasing demand—the concentration in Ireland is out of all proportion to the capacity of the electricity generating and distribution network to sustain it. Currently 21 percent of Ireland's electricity is guzzled by data centres seeking to maintain a world position in the lucrative global boom. Current and future investment in the sector is entirely designed to ensure that share increases. The International Energy Agency predicts a figure of 32 percent as early as 2026. No other country in the world comes close. The United States, for example, allows around 6 percent of its power to be consumed by data centres.

The contradiction between the power consumption—with multiple appropriate back up and fail-safe systems, of the data centre boom—reliably servicing many of the world's wealthiest corporations, and the protracted misery inflicted on millions of Irish citizens by climate change intensified storms, is stark. It poses point blank the need for rational, global, economic planning of all areas of economic life to service the needs of the human population, not of profit and the corporate oligarchy.



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