

Harvey: There's no one to blame for excessive power outages following Eugene's 'snowpocalypse'

Shortly following the heavy snowfall and resulting ice storm earlier this month, nearly 6,000 residents in Eugene lost power. Half of them were unlucky enough to land a spot on the very bottom of the Eugene Water and Electric Board's "to-do list" and didn't get power back for a week.

In cities where it snows often, intense weather may be nothing to fret over. But in Eugene — where it rarely snows twice in one year — locals called this brief snow and ice storm the "snowpocalypse." Undoubtedly, we were nowhere near as prepared as we should have been.

EWEB addressed the public by posting announcements on its Facebook page, Twitter account and website. In a [news release](#) on Feb. 12, EWEB announced that it had restored power to half of its customers. By then it had been four days since the power outages.

I, for one, couldn't help but think to myself: "Half? It's been four days and you're proud of restoring only half of your customers' power?" At this point I was frustrated because my candles were almost dead, my fridge was starting to smell and I had to go on campus to use the Internet or shower.

I gave them a call and asked for an explanation.

"The ice storm that hit us last Saturday ... it hit the whole valley," said Joe Harwood, EWEB's external communications coordinator. "We made our first call for mutual aid at 8 a.m. Saturday morning. We called again Saturday afternoon and again on Sunday, Monday, Tuesday ... The bottom line is everyone was dealing with their own problems ... And the out-of-state crews take 96 hours, minimum, to mobilize. That's four days, so they won't even consider sending people out of state unless it's going to be a multi-week restoration."

For some people, the loss of power meant more than just darkness, spoiled food and cold nights.

Ryan Elliot, who lives on Coburg Road near Beltline, said his family went without power for five days. "I understand they have a hierarchy," Elliot said in regard to

the order in which the neighborhoods without power were addressed by EWEB. “But we wanted information ... We have a 7-month-old baby who was getting over a head cold and a big German Shepherd. Our house was cold. And we couldn’t go anywhere because most hotels are not going to allow big dogs.”

Elliot’s wife called EWEB several times and was dissatisfied with their customer service. “They told my wife that they know it’s taking a while, but they don’t want to call outside help because they think they’re doing a pretty good job.”

Meanwhile, Elliot had to cancel an important work event because he was not willing to leave his wife and baby alone in the house without power.

Finally, on Thursday afternoon, Elliot’s power was restored. “I was actually pretty surprised,” Elliot said. “At this point, I didn’t expect it back until [Friday] at the earliest.” Unfortunately for the other half of Eugene, their power wouldn’t be restored for a couple more days.

Hearing Elliot’s story brought up another question: isn’t there some way to quickly restore power to those who need it first, such as Elliot and his family? This is where the 6,000 customers came into play. With that many people experiencing power outages, it would be incredibly difficult to address one family individually.

Harwood said EWEB plans to upgrade to smart meters soon, which will allow the utility to indicate whether or not a certain customer’s power is out and fix the problem sooner.

An additional question that Harwood has heard before is: why doesn’t EWEB have some sort of seasonal or on-call staff to work in case of weather emergencies?

“Would you wanna pay for that extra staff?” Harwood said. “We have five crews of linemen ... To get certified you have to go through years of training.”

The storm had affected the whole valley, thousands of customers were out of power and these types of storms are fairly rare here. With this in mind, most customers should have a little more sympathy for the workers who did their best to restore power to Eugene.

“We understand people are frustrated... I know several of EWEB’s linemen that worked two days straight without a break,” Harwood said.

In this type of situation, no one is to blame but Mother Nature.