

Storm whips into Northeast bringing snow, rain

DAN SEWELL - Associated Press - Associated Press

A powerful winter storm brought snow to inland parts of the Northeast and driving rain and wind to areas along the coast Thursday, a day after it swept through the nation's middle, dumping a record snowfall in Arkansas and wrecking post-holiday plans for thousands of travelers.

The storm, which was blamed for 15 deaths, pushed through the Upper Ohio Valley and made its way into the Northeast Wednesday night. By Thursday morning, there was anywhere from a few inches of snow to a foot in some locations.

National Weather Service spokesman David Roth said the Northeast's heaviest snowfall would be in northern Pennsylvania, upstate New York and inland sections of several New England states before the storm ended Friday morning and headed to Canada.

Dale Lamprey, who was clearing off the sidewalk outside the legislative office building in Concord, N.H., already had several hours of shoveling under his belt by 8:30 a.m. Thursday.

"I got here at quarter of five and it's been windy, it's been snowing and I think it changed over to sleet and freezing rain at one point," he said. "It's pretty bad."

He didn't expect it to get much better.

"I'm going to be shoveling all day, just trying to keep up with the snow," he said. "Which is impossible."

The East Coast's largest cities — New York, Philadelphia and Boston — were seeing mostly high winds and rain Thursday morning. Other areas were getting a messy mix of rain and snow or just rain — enough to slow down commuters and those still heading home from visits with family.

Thousands of travelers were trying to make it home Thursday after the fierce storm stranded them at airports or relatives' homes around the region. Some inbound flights were delayed in Philadelphia and New York's LaGuardia, but the wet and windy weather wasn't leading to delays at other major East Coast airports.

On New York's Long Island, a Southwest Airlines jet bound for Tampa, Fla., veered off a taxiway and got stuck in mud Thursday morning. Officials said there were no injuries to the 129 passengers and five crew members, who were expected to take a later flight. Though the area received heavy rain overnight, Southwest spokesman Paul Flanigan said it wasn't clear whether that played a role in the incident.

In Pittsburgh, a flight that landed safely during the storm Wednesday night got

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stuck in snow for about two hours on the tarmac. The American Airlines flight arrived between 8 and 9 p.m., but then ran over a snow patch and got stuck.

Airport spokeswoman JoAnn Jenny told the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette workers tried for nearly two hours to tow the plane to the gate before deciding to bus passengers to the terminal.

Hundreds of flights were canceled or delayed on Wednesday and scores of motorists got stuck on icy roads or slid into drifts. Said John Kwiatkowski, an Indianapolis-based meteorologist with the weather service: "The way I've been describing it is as a low-end blizzard, but that's sort of like saying a small Tyrannosaurus rex."

Kentucky State Police said the storm contributed to two fatal crashes Wednesday. And a New York man was killed after his pickup truck skidded on an icy road in northwest Pennsylvania, also on Wednesday.

The storm system spawned Gulf Coast region tornadoes on Christmas Day, startling people like Bob and Sherry Sims of Mobile, Alabama, who'd just finished dinner.

"We heard that very distinct sound, like a freight train," said Bob Sims. They headed for a center bathroom.

Power was still out at the Sims' home on Wednesday, but the house wasn't damaged and they used a generator to run heaters to stay warm. Some neighbors were less fortunate, their roofs peeled away and porches smashed by falling trees.

In Arkansas, some of the nearly 200,000 people who lost power could be without it for as long as a week because of snapped poles and wires after ice and 10 inches of snow coated power lines, said the state's largest utility, Entergy Arkansas.

Further north, the storm knocked out power to more than 6,000 homes and businesses in central and western Maryland, and utilities were preparing for more outages as the wind picked up. In New Jersey, gusts of more than 70 mph were recorded along the coast, and the weather service issued a flood warning for some coastal areas.

The storm also left freezing temperatures in its aftermath, and forecasters said parts of the Southeast from Virginia to Florida saw severe thunderstorms.

Schools on break and workers taking holiday vacations meant that many people could avoid messy commutes, but those who had to travel were urged to avoid it. Snow was blamed for scores of vehicle accidents in multiple states, including Indiana, where about 40 vehicles got bogged down trying to make it up a slick hill in central Indiana, and four state snowplows slid off roads.

Officials in Ohio blamed the bad weather for a crash that killed an 18-year-old girl, who lost control of her car Wednesday afternoon and smashed into an oncoming snow plow on a highway northeast of Cincinnati.

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A man and a woman in Evansville, Ind., were killed when the scooter they were riding went out of control on a snowy street Wednesday and they were hit by a pickup truck.

Two passengers in a car on a sleet-slickened Arkansas highway were killed Wednesday in a head-on collision, and two people, including a 76-year-old Milwaukee woman, were killed Tuesday on Oklahoma highways. Deaths from wind-toppled trees were reported in Texas and Louisiana. Other storm-related deaths include a man checking on a disabled vehicle near Allentown, Pa., who was struck and killed Wednesday night, and two people killed in separate crashes in Virginia.

The day after Christmas wasn't expected to be particularly busy for AAA, but its Cincinnati-area branch had its busiest Wednesday of the year. By mid-afternoon, nearly 400 members had been helped with tows, jump starts and other aid, with calls still coming in, spokesman Mike Mills said.

Few truckers were stopping into a TravelCenters of America truck stop in Willington, Conn., near the Massachusetts border early Thursday. Usually 20 to 30 an hour stop in overnight, but high winds and slushy roads had cut that to two to three people an hour.

"A lot of people are staying off the road," said Louis Zalewa, 31, who works there selling gasoline and staffing the store. "I think people are being smart."

Behind the storm, Mississippi's governor declared states of emergency in eight counties with more than 25 people reported injured and 70 homes left damaged.

Cindy Williams stood near a home in McNeill, Miss., where its front had collapsed into a pile of wood and brick, a balcony and the porch ripped apart. Large oak trees were uprooted and winds sheared off treetops in a nearby grove. But she focused instead on the fact that all her family members had escaped harm.

"We are so thankful," she said. "God took care of us."

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