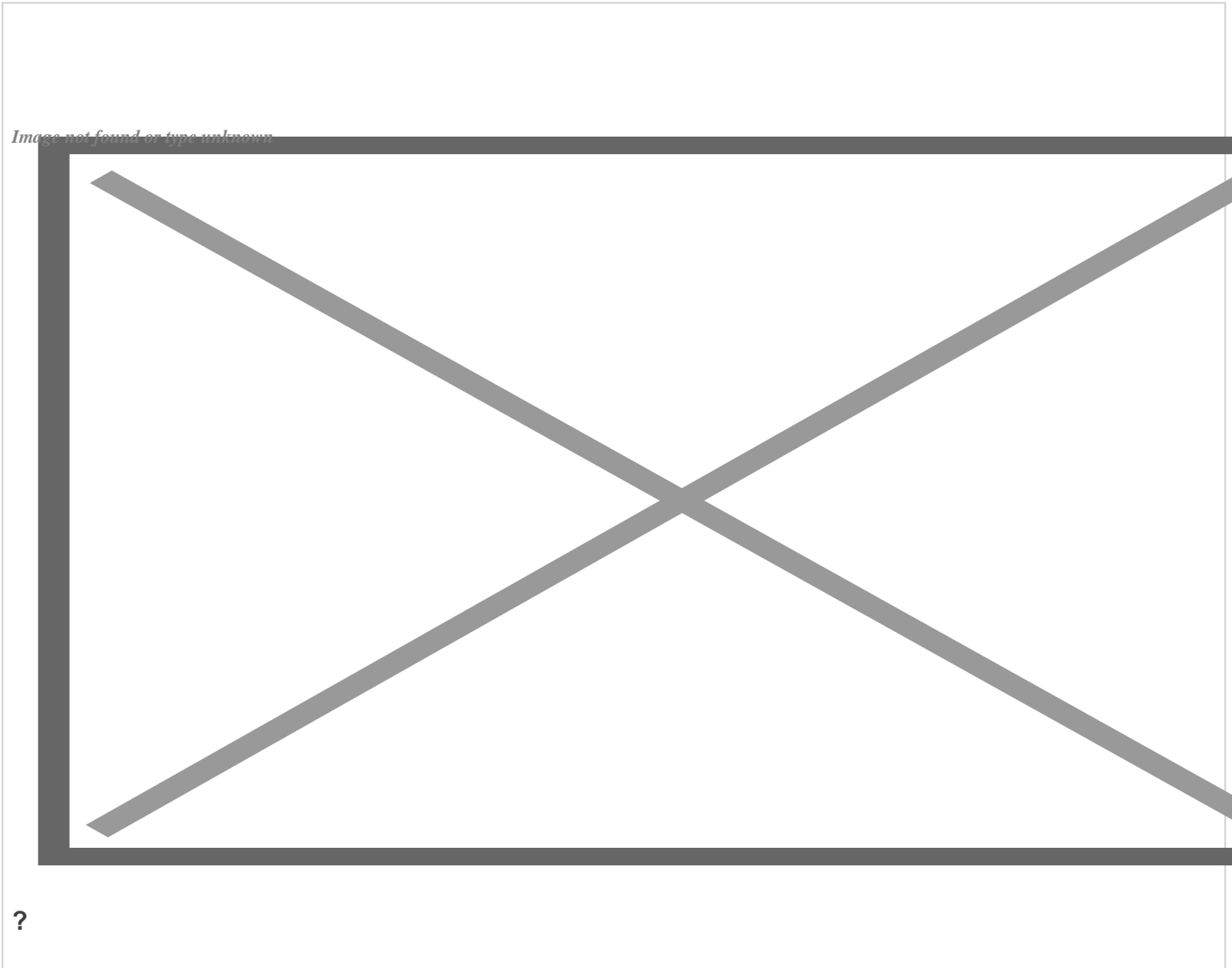


U.S. deep freeze leaves at least 16 dead and nearly 2 million without power



Washington, December 24 (RHC)-- An arctic blast gripped much of the United States on Saturday leaving nearly 2 million without power, at least 16 dead from weather-related car crashes and thousands stranded due to flight cancellations.

As plummeting temperatures were expected to bring the coldest Christmas Eve on record, energy systems across the country were strained by rising demand for heat and storm-related damage to transmission lines.

Some 1.8 million U.S. homes and businesses were left without power as of early Saturday morning, according to tracking site Poweroutage.us. Many electric companies were asking customers to conserve energy by not running large appliances and turning off unneeded lights. The disruptions also upended daily routines and holiday plans for millions of Americans during one of the busiest travel periods of the year.

Nearly 2,000 US flights were canceled on Saturday, with total delays tallying 4,000, according to flight-tracking service FlightAware. More than 5,000 flights were canceled on Friday, the flight tracking said.

The American Automobile Association had estimated that 112.7 million people planned to venture 50 miles (80 km) or more from home between Friday and January 2nd. But stormy weather heading into the weekend likely ended up keeping many of them at home.

Fatal car accidents around the country left at least 16 dead from weather-related accidents, according to media reports. Two motorists were killed, and numerous others injured, in a 50-vehicle pileup that shut down the Ohio Turnpike in both directions during a blizzard near Toledo, forcing an evacuation of stranded motorists by bus to keep them from freezing in their cars, officials said.

Three of the deaths were reported in Kentucky, where Gov. Andy Beshear, on Saturday, warned residents to "Stay home, stay safe, stay alive." "I know it's really hard because it's Christmas Eve. But we're having dozens and dozens of accidents," he said in an online briefing. "It's simply not safe."

Blizzard conditions remained on Saturday for Buffalo, New York and its surrounding county on the edge of Lake Erie in western New York where between 4-to-6 feet of snow will fall by Sunday, the National Weather Service said. The city imposed a driving ban on Friday, which remained in effect on Saturday, and all three Buffalo-area border crossing bridges were closed to inbound traffic from Canada due to the weather.

Temperatures topped out on Saturday at just 7 degrees Fahrenheit (minus 13 Celsius) in Pittsburgh, surpassing its previous all-time coldest Christmas Eve high of 13 F, set in 1983, the (NWS) said.

Cities in Georgia and South Carolina - Athens and Charleston - were likewise expected to record their coldest daytime Christmas Eve high temperatures, while Washington, D.C., was forecast to experience its chilliest December 24th since 1989.

The flurry of yuletide temperature records were predicted as a U.S. deep freeze sharpened by perilous wind chills continued to envelope much of the eastern two-thirds of the nation. "The cold snap will persist through Christmas," said meteorologist Ashton Robinson Cook, at the NWS Weather Prediction Center.

Minneapolis was the coldest spot in America on Saturday at minus 6 degrees Fahrenheit, and on Christmas morning, the coldest spot will be Fargo, North Dakota at minus 20, he said.

The National Weather Service said its map of existing or impending meteorological hazards "depicts one of the greatest extents of winter weather warnings and advisories ever."

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