



FIRST SELECTMAN'S OFFICE

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August 27, 2020

TO: Joint Committee on Energy and Technology

FROM: Matthew Knickerbocker
First Selectman, Town of Bethel

RE: Response to Tropical Storm Isaias

Dear Sen. Needleman, Rep. Arconti and Members of the Committee:

I want to first express my gratitude for the opportunity to share the Town of Bethel's experiences and frustrations with the recovery of electricity following Tropical Storm Isaias. While no public utility can be expected to predict weather with 100% certainty, nor be able to fully prevent the destructive forces of nature, Eversource could have been, and should have been far more prepared for this event. Additionally, following the storm, the company should have had an effective communication and recovery plan in place. It did not.

Tropical Storm Isaias left over 5,800 Bethel residents and businesses without power for up to nine days. Many residents, some who are unemployed due to the COVID-19 pandemic, lost frozen foods totaling into the tens of thousands of dollars. The core of Bethel's downtown retail business district, including some family-owned shops as well as the downtown area's only grocery outlet, were without power into the seventh day following the storm. Some of these small businesses, already battered by the pandemic, may now close for good as a result of the extended outage.

More troubling is the fact that several critical infrastructure facilities were not addressed until nearly a week had passed. The Bethel Police Department and both fire stations remained without power for one week following the storm. The town's utility department operates 11 sewage pumping stations; 7 of them were left without power for up to 8.75 days. There are also 8 drinking water pumping stations. 6 remained without power for up to 8 full days. While most of these critical facilities have generation capacity, there were frequent instances of fuel tanks running within few hours of zero, due to the difficulty in obtaining fuel deliveries. In total, the Town spent over \$40,000 in unplanned fuel purchases due to the extended outages.

LOWER PRIORITY GIVEN TO "MAKE SAFE" OPERATIONS

The greatest concern is the company's apparent abandonment of long-established "make safe" protocols. Following the devastation of storms Irene, Alfred and Sandy in 2011 and 2012, municipal and state emergency management officials met with representatives from Northeast Utilities (prior to the merger) to agree on a set of protocols to keep the public safe from downed live power lines. First and foremost is prioritizing "make safe" operations to clear the roadways of downed wires and downed trees with wires in them. This is work that local municipal road construction crews are not permitted to do unless accompanied by a qualified Eversource line crew.

Eversource failed to support "make safe" operations in favor of restoring power where easily accomplished.

In Bethel's case, there were ten roads blocked with downed trees and wires. Two of these locations were cul de sacs, trapping a total of 16 homes without access to emergency fire or medical assistance. Despite repeated top priority requests through our Eversource liaison, the company provided no "make safe" crews until 5:00pm on Friday, August 7th, three full days after the storm. That crew helped Bethel's highway department clear just one blockage, but was then pulled off the job to another town by Eversource. The company did not again provide "make safe" help until the following weekend. Downed trees and wires were not fully cleared until 4am on Monday, August 10th.

State Route 58 in Bethel was partially blocked by a large tree and was suspended over the roadway only by power lines, creating a clear danger to the public. The company did not address this site until the afternoon of Friday, August 7th, three days after the storm. See picture below of a delivery truck attempting to squeeze under the tree. In one attempt (not shown), the driver moved farther to the side of the road, causing the top of the truck to scrape the communication cables holding up the tree. The driver was unsuccessful. The truck became temporarily lodged under the tree and was forced to back away. Passenger cars passed under the tree unrestricted for three full days (see picture no 2 below).





DYSFUNCTIONAL COMMAND AND CONTROL

Bethel opened its emergency operations office the day before the storm. Our Eversource liaison was provided a full list of road closures with wires, including dead-ends no access, as well as priority-one critical infrastructure such as fire, police, school buildings used for emergency purposes and water and waste water utilities as soon as the storm ended. These priorities were reviewed and discussed several times per day, sometimes on an hourly basis. Repeated requests were submitted to the liaison for a “make safe” crew to allow our highway department to reopen roads for emergency access.

Our liaison was unable to provide accurate information. It was clear she had no support from or direct access to decision makers at higher levels. She would often report that a crew was being dispatched to one of our priority locations, only to have that instruction overridden, diverting the crew to a different town without informing her.

The most serious breakdown occurred when trying to have power restored to the Bethel Police Department. The liaison tried to get a crew dispatched for six days without success, despite daily requests from our emergency management official. On the seventh day, the Chief of Police decided to bypass the liaison and call Eversource’s “downed wire” line directly from the police dispatch center. The Eversource employee who answered that call was incredulous that the Bethel PD was still without power that long after the storm, saying “no one told us, we had no idea you were out”, after six days of escalating the outage through the liaison’s office. A truck was dispatched and the power restored to the police facility within one hour of the call.

There were numerous cases observed in Bethel and other locations where both Eversource crews and outside contractors who had come in from out of state were found sitting in parking lots, waiting for instructions from Eversource. These crews were observed idling for hours, waiting for instructions.

POOR CONSUMER COMMUNICATION

For multiple days following the storm, residents were unable to contact Eversource to report outages through either their customer service 800 number or their website, as both were malfunctioning.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Based upon the storm recovery experience in Bethel, we can conclude the following:

1. Eversource failed to preposition sufficient assets in preparation for the storm.
2. Eversource failed to adhere to previously agreed upon “make safe” protocols, leaving residents vulnerable to life-threatening danger.
3. Eversource failed to address critical infrastructure and public safety facilities, instead dedicating scarce resources to reducing the total number of outages.

Based on these conclusions, I urge, in the strongest possible terms, that the General Assembly and Public Utilities Regulatory Authority work to immediately enact and implement the following:

1. Hold the company legally responsible for private residential food spoilage that occurs as a result of extended, preventable outages (this is already done in other states).
2. Require the company, by law, to use the latest NOAA weather forecast, rather than their own internal forecast, when pre-deploying recovery assets prior to the arrival of a storm.
3. Put an end to guaranteed profit margins and take exorbitant executive pay packages into account when ruling on rate increase requests.

Thank you for the opportunity to share these experiences.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Matt Knickerbocker". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Matt" and last name "Knickerbocker" clearly distinguishable.

Enclosures:

1. Letter from M. Knickerbocker to PURA in opposition to Eversource rate increase.
2. Analysis by DPW Director summarizing Eversource response to TS Isaias.



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Mary Churchill, Benefits Coordinator

August 20, 2020

Ms. Marissa Gillett
Chairman
Public Utilities Regulatory Authority
Ten Franklin Square
New Britain, CT 06051

Dear Chairman Gillett,

I am writing to you today to inform the commission of the slow and disorganized response by Eversource to Tropical Storm Isaias. While no public utility can be expected to predict weather with 100% certainty, nor be able to fully prevent the destructive forces of nature, Eversource could have been, and should have been far more prepared for this event. Additionally, following the storm, the company should have had an effective communication and recovery plan in place. It did not.

The storm caused power outages to more than 5,800 homes and businesses, some for up to nine days. Many residents lost all their refrigerated food, costing into the tens of thousands of dollars. These are citizens who can ill afford the losses. Many are unemployed or struggling to get by on reduced paychecks due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Some had stocked up on frozen foods in order to reduce the number of shopping trips to minimize risk of contracting the virus. Some families lost over \$2,000 worth of frozen foods above the amount covered by homeowners insurance.

Most egregiously, long-standing “make safe” protocols were ignored in favor sending what few Eversource assets were available to make “easy fixes” where possible. This decision would have certainly made the recovery numbers look better, but by doing so created dangerous conditions that could have had deadly consequences.

MAKE-SAFE PROTOCOLS GIVEN LOW PRIORITY

In storm cleanup situations, by mutual consent between the utility and state and municipal officials, clearing trees and downed wires from roadways is absolutely the most critical first step in recovery. Tropical Storm

Isaias left the Town of Bethel with numerous critical facilities without power for up to six days, including fire stations, police headquarters and waste water and drinking water pumping equipment. There were also multiple road closures, some of which fully trapped residents behind downed trees in neighborhoods with dead-end roads, making them completely inaccessible to any fire or medical vehicles. Bethel's highway crews were powerless to clear these areas until Eversource assigned "make safe" crews to the sites. The first "make safe" crew did not arrive in Bethel until late on Friday, August 7th, three days after the storm. Eversource was unable to provide sufficient support to clear all downed wires until the evening of Sunday, August 9th, 120 hours after the storm had ended.

It must be noted, however, that during this time period, power was restored to approximately 2,200 Bethel homes. This is evidence that lowering the outage figures was given a higher priority than ensuring public safety.

DYSFUNCTIONAL COMMAND AND CONTROL

Bethel activated its Emergency Operations Center the morning of the storm and made contact with Eversource. Per the normal protocol, the Town was assigned a liaison to function as our main contact point for storm recovery. While hard working and attentive, the individual assigned to this role had no apparent training in emergency operations. It was also obvious that she had no direct access to key decision makers. While Bethel's Emergency Operations Director stayed in contact with our liaison constantly, sometimes on an hourly basis, she was often unable to relay accurate information. On more than one occasion she notified our EOC director that "make safe" crews were being dispatched to Bethel, only to have them diverted to a different town by Eversource dispatch.

To illustrate with a concrete example, the Bethel Police Department was off line with no power for six full days, despite the fact that this is identified as a critical facility. During this time the headquarters was powered by its auxiliary generator. Fuel supplies were scarce, and the unit came close to zero fuel several times. This issue was escalated to our liaison on a daily basis, yet she was unable to get a firm commitment for restoring power. On Monday, August 10th, out of frustration, the chief of police bypassed the storm recovery process and called the Eversource internal number normally used to report damaged utility poles from motor vehicle accidents. The Eversource employee who answered expressed surprise that a facility as important as a police headquarters was without power, saying to the chief, "We had no idea. This is the first we've heard of this." He promptly dispatched a line crew, and within sixty minutes power was restored. It is very clear the Eversource liaison was not well supported in her role and had no access to the decision makers at any time during the recovery effort.

BROKEN COMMUNICATION SYSTEMS

For the first 48 hours after the storm, neither the Eversource customer service number nor the online reporting system functioned reliably. This resulted in hundreds of angry calls to town hall, where the office of the First Selectman effectively became Eversource's surrogate customer service center (but without the ability to deliver accurate information, since we were not receiving any).

HARM TO SMALL BUSINESSES

The center of Bethel's downtown village district, the retail core of the town, was out of power for six full days. The town's main grocery store, located in this district, was forced to close after six days when its generator

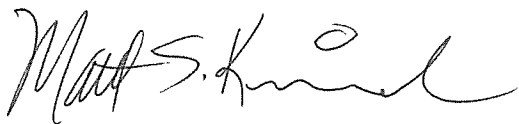
broke down. Some of the small delicatessens and take-out restaurants in this district, still struggling to stay afloat after months of COVID related restrictions, may not survive at all due to the six-day outage.

Personally, I do not accept the argument that the storm was unpredictable, nor that the damage was greater than expected. It has been well reported in numerous press accounts that Eversource failed to update its damage estimates as the weather forecasts worsened. It is also clear that Eversource's 25% reduction in personnel since the 2011 storms have left the company weakened and unprepared for known weather probabilities.

These conditions are wholly unacceptable. It is only by sheer luck that this town did not suffer a catastrophic fire or life-threatening medical emergency during the many days we waited and our EOC staff begged Eversource for even the most minimal of resources to help us reach closed-off areas.

Eversource must not only be held accountable for this storm, I also urge PURA and our state legislators to work together to enact laws making the company financially liable for spoiled food and other damages caused by their neglect. Unless there is a financial penalty extracted for failure to plan and conduct business for the benefit of the people it serves, Eversource will simply continue to cut costs in order to pass profits back to shareholders and its top executives.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Matt S. Knickerbocker". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Matt" being more prominent.

Matthew S. Knickerbocker
First Selectman

CC:	Gov. Ned Lamont	Lt. Governor Susan Bysiewicz
	DEEP Commissioner Katie Dykes	Sen. J. Kushner
	Sen. W. Haskell	Rep. R. Allie-Brennan
	Rep. S. Harding	S. Pugner
	T. Galliford	Bethel Board of Selectmen



TOWN OF BETHEL – UTILITIES DEPARTMENT

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M E M O R A N D U M

DATE: August 17, 2020

FROM: Thomas Villa, Public Utilities / Public Works Director

TO: File

RE: Storm Isaias – Eversource Performance Summary

The following were deficiencies observed regarding Eversource Energy's response to Storm Isaias.

1. Broken communication chain between Town of Bethel and Eversource Energy. Bethel municipal officials spoke directly to a liaison to provide priority roads to be cleared and facilities to be restored. The liaison communicated with Eversource Energy Operations personnel. However, work crews were not dispatched to those locations, despite repeated requests. Eversource Energy either did not have adequate crews available in Bethel or dispatched crews based on their priorities.
2. Inadequate response early on with the correct work crews to assess damage and quickly and thoroughly communicate the extent of the damage to the proper decision makers.
3. Not having these assessment crews immediately working directly with Town personnel to determine the hardest hit roads with downed wires and poles. Bethel Police Department and Public Works Department were out in the community gathering this information and this should have been an efficient way of providing the information directly to Eversource Energy decision makers. In reality, this information was communicated, but it did not translate to getting crews to those locations.
4. Not having enough "make safe" crews available right after the storm subsided. They should have been pre-positioned. They would be available to verify power lines are de-energized and to ground out any lines prior to tree crews cutting up downed trees in the road.
5. Not having enough tree crews available right after the storm subsided. They should have been pre-positioned. They would be available to work with the "make safe" crews and town public works crews to more efficiently and quickly get roads cleared.
6. Opening roads as quickly as possible for emergency vehicles is not only a life safety issue for the community, it will allow the power restoration crews to get to work restoring power more quickly. Eversource Energy's slow response on the assessment, "make safe" and tree removal aspects delayed the power restoration process.
7. Not enough line crews to work with tree crews. Multiple occasions as late as Friday, August 7, three full days after the storm where tree crews were available to work but were idle because they were waiting for Eversource to provide an electric line crew to work with.

8. Late response restoring power. The majority of customers were restored after August 10, six days after the storm.
9. Not understanding the importance of water and wastewater facilities and having them on a priority customer list. Loss of generator power during a utility power outage event can lead to health, safety and environmental issues. It is imperative to restore these facilities to utility power as soon as possible to avoid potential loss of water pressure and the potential for sewage overflows to the environment.

The following are suggested improvements for power restoration following Storm Isaias (and future storms).

1. Provide a representative to local municipalities to work with them in town immediately following the storm. This individual would have “boots on the ground” and can communicate first hand the status of local conditions.
2. Set up a uniform restoration protocol. While every storm may be different and storms change track during the event, the results are typically the same – downed poles, wires and extensive power outages. The protocol should be uniform and followed after any storm – assess damage, “make safe” by de-energizing and grounding, cut and remove downed trees, start power restoration.
3. Pre-position the right crews regionally throughout the state. Each region would require assessment crews, “make safe crews, tree crews and restoration crews.
4. Focus on opening up local roads quickly. Working with local officials will leverage their resources and knowledge of the local area and will assist in getting to the power restoration phase sooner.
5. Improve the communication from the local municipal officials through the liaison to the Eversource Energy decision maker to the work crews.

	Power Lost		Power Restored		Hours on Generator
SEWER					
Paul St	15:00	4-Aug	11:00	5-Aug	20
Plumtrees	Never				0
Stony Hill #1	15:00	4-Aug	17:00	12-Aug	194
Stony Hill #2	15:00	4-Aug	16:00	5-Aug	25
Berkshire	15:00	4-Aug	23:00	11-Aug	176
Payne	15:00	4-Aug	23:00	11-Aug	176
Walnut	15:00	4-Aug	9:00	13-Aug	210
Clarke Park #1	Never				0
Clarke Park #2	Never				0
Bethel Meadows	15:00	4-Aug	19:00	6-Aug	52
Summit	Never				0
WATER					
Chestnut	15:00	4-Aug	11:00	12-Aug	188
Eureka	15:00	4-Aug	19:00	6-Aug	52
Maple Ave	15:00	4-Aug	18:00	4-Aug	3
Hoyts hill	15:00	4-Aug	13:00	11-Aug	166
Summit #1	Never				0
Summit #2	Never				0
South St	15:00	4-Aug	4:30	11-Aug	158
Briarcliff	out	no gen	7:30	11-Aug	161
TOWN					
Bethel Fire House	15:00	4-Aug	4:30	11-Aug	158
Stony Hill Fire house	15:00	4-Aug	4:00	10-Aug	133
Bethel PD	15:00	4-Aug	14:00	10-Aug	143
Public Works	15:00	4-Aug	7:00	7-Aug	64
Municipal Center	Never				0
Radio Tower	15:00	4-Aug	13:00	12-Aug	190