

Hurricane Ida power failures prompt calls for more solar energy, tougher grids

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New Orleans residents and others are eyeing renewable energy as a way to shore up power supplies against increasingly extreme weather fueled by climate change

- * Extreme weather increasingly threatens power grids
- * Adding renewables could improve resilience to outages
- * U.S. Congress is pushing for new money to adapt grids

By David Sherfinski

WASHINGTON, Sept 9 (Thomson Reuters Foundation) - Jenel Hazlett, 61, had a choice to make with Hurricane Ida bearing down on New Orleans: stay in the city and hope for the best, or evacuate with her small "zoo" of animals in tow.

In the end Hazlett stayed put - and online - in her raised bungalow that features solar panels and a battery backup system. Those proved a huge advantage amid power outages that initially left more than one million in the state without electricity.

"We haven't had to chase gas like my neighbors have for their generators - the sun comes to me," she told the Thomson Reuters Foundation by phone. "I don't want to have to fool with a gas generator."

Ida's swath of destruction across the eastern half of the United States has put renewed focus on the need for power alternatives and backups as climate-fueled extreme weather increasingly threatens centralized electrical grids.

"The solutions are in our own hands – you can just look across the street at folks who have power and those who do not," said Monique Harden with the Deep South Center for Environmental Justice, based in New Orleans.

When Ida struck, it took out eight major transmission lines delivering electricity

to the New Orleans metro area, after Hurricane Laura severely damaged lines last year as well.

U.S. President Joe Biden, who trekked to Louisiana last week to assess the damage, said moving power lines below ground - a costly measure, he admitted - would be one way to build energy system resilience to worsening storms.

Wooden poles carrying electricity transmission lines can snap in hurricanes and "we know, for a fact, if (lines) are underground, they're secure," he said.

The Biden-backed \$1.2 trillion infrastructure package moving through Congress contains about \$65 billion for power grid upgrades – though environmentalists say significantly more is needed to make energy systems both climate-smart and resilient.

Both changes are crucial, as continuing widespread use of oil, gas and coal for energy is driving accelerating climate change, which in turn increases the severity of hurricanes, wildfires and other energy-grid-threatening disasters, they say.

Many New Orleans residents have invested in home solar systems, but the upfront cost of such systems - even though they then provide cheap energy - keeps too many people from following Hazlett's lead.

While the costs of home solar installations are swiftly falling as their use becomes more widespread, U.S. federal tax credits to help pay the costs are also declining.

A 30% tax credit in recent years has now fallen to 26% for systems installed after 2019 and is set to decline further, though congressional Democrats are in the midst of an aggressive push to extend or expand such breaks.

https://trustorg.secure.force.com/members/members_login?flag=true/ Hazlett said the tax incentives were a big reason she could afford her system.

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"When I put my solar panels up, I only paid for 20% of them – it was what

allowed me to put the panels on the house," she said.

The state of Louisiana has also moved in recent years to scale back the practice of 'net metering', which gives those operating solar panels energy bill credits for excess power they feed into the grid.

Wider use of renewable energy and resilient small-scale energy "microgrids", and expanded numbers of power transmission lines could have helped people weather Hurricane Ida better, said Daniel Tait of the Energy and Policy Institute, a U.S. watchdog group.

"New Orleans is in the crosshairs of climate change and hurricanes – it has been and it will be," he said. "But more distributed infrastructure can help reduce the impact."

UTILITY SCRUTINY

Initial electricity outages in the U.S. Gulf Coast region after Ida swiftly spurred renewed scrutiny of Entergy Corporation, Louisiana's largest utility, and its efforts to bolster the electric system against storms.

One challenge is that multiple bodies of water - Lake Pontchartrain, the Gulf of Mexico, and the Mississippi River - limit the corridors available for adding transmission lines.

More lines could help ensure at least some power gets through after increasingly powerful storms.

The company also has asked regulators to approve more than \$500 million to repair and rebuild transmission lines damaged by 2020 hurricanes.

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An Entergy spokesperson did not respond to questions about why its
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Transmission lines **news** in the most recent storm, but the company has
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defended its response and recovery efforts in the aftermath.

"The reason the lights are out is not because we aren't building a resilient system," Rod West, Entergy's group president of utility operations, said last week.

"The lights are out because Mother Nature is still the undisputed, undefeated heavyweight champion of the world."

Still, power grids across the United States appear increasingly vulnerable as climate-fueled extreme weather events accelerate across the country.

In February, a major cold snap crippled Texas's grid, knocking out power to more than 4 million residents and contributing to dozens of deaths, officials said.

"How many people were having to burn anything they could because they didn't have fuel... or they didn't have a generator at all and just burned stuff to keep warm?" Tait asked.

He said the Texas blackout highlighted safety issues from carbon monoxide when residents turn to gas-powered generators - rather than solar or wind power - to keep the lights on.

The Louisiana Department of Health said there have been at least four deaths and more than 140 emergency department visits in about the last week tied to carbon monoxide poisoning, though it's unclear how many are directly related to generator use after Ida.

Farther west, Pacific Gas & Electric shut off power for about 48,000 California customers last month as a planned safety measure when wildfires threatened the Golden State's power grid.

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Hazlett, of New Orleans, said a more robust electricity grid, along with properly
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resilience to storm threats moving forward.

"Something's got to change with the way tax credits are done in order to incentivize distributed generation of clean energy," she said. "And (it's) quiet energy – my God, those generators are awful."

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