

Frequently asked questions regarding the February 2021 Energy Emergency



Why is our area experiencing an energy emergency?

Because of a combination of situations that have led to energy demand outpacing available generation resources.

1. A reduced amount of wind energy generating electricity across a wide area. There has been very little wind compared to normal and some instances of icing in areas along with bitter cold weather which can cause wind towers to shut down to protect their components from damage.
2. Tight natural gas supplies and deliveries in some parts of the region have caused natural gas-fired power plants to either shut down or not run at full capacity. There have been reports of natural gas supply chain issues in several areas.
3. Record cold weather over the Southwest Power Pool footprint has created demand for electricity never seen before in the region. That extreme demand for electricity is putting stress on the electric grid.

What is the Southwest Power Pool and how do they operate within our utility group?

The Southwest Power Pool is a Regional Transmission Organization that balances energy generation with energy usage across 14 states from the Canadian border south to Oklahoma, New Mexico and parts of Texas. On a typical day, generation and transmission assets are used in the most efficient way possible by balancing energy generation with energy needs, allowing generation units across the SPP footprint to run and keep the grid stable at the lowest possible cost.

In the Upper Midwest, the Western Area Power Administration (WAPA), the federal agency that markets power from the hydroelectric dams, is the Transmission Operator in the region. WAPA operates the larger bulk transmission infrastructure that delivers power to East River Electric. East River Electric operates transmission and substation infrastructure that brings power to local member distribution systems who, in turn, deliver power to homes, farms and businesses. In an emergency situation, SPP gives WAPA notice that rolling outages are needed with little notice. Then WAPA is required to begin rolling outages which impacts the transmission and substations in East River Electric's system. When their substations are de-energized, consumers of local utilities experience a power outage.

Being a part of the Southwest Power Pool has created many benefits for utilities and their consumers in the region. In times of unplanned outages of generation units in an area, the Southwest Power Pool is able to access generation in another area to ensure consumers continue to have power. It has also brought financial benefits to consumers.

Why wasn't there enough generation to meet the extra electricity demand?

The utilities involved in the Southwest Power Pool are required to carry a surplus of generation resources throughout the year over and above their historic peak electric demand so they are prepared for extreme circumstances. However, when wind resources and other generation are constrained, there is a limited amount of other generation available to serve the region's recent record demand for electricity.

Have rolling outages ever happened in our region before?

No. This is an unprecedented event in the history of the Southwest Power Pool. Local utilities have of course dealt with outages in our area in the past due to storms, icing, wind and other natural occurrences. However, the record-setting cold weather that stretches from Canada to Texas has created energy demands never seen before on the transmission system across the entire region.

Why were consumers not given advance notice about the rolling outages?

The rolling outages were an emergency action that the Southwest Power Pool worked for the past couple of days to prevent. Starting on Sunday, Feb. 14, and continuing on Monday, Feb. 15, SPP asked member utilities to begin asking the public to reduce their energy usage as a way to lessen the potential strain on the electric grid. Utilities began to make public appeals in the media and social media beginning on Feb. 14 and through Feb. 15. On Feb. 15, SPP transitioned to its highest alert level, EEA Level 3, resulting in rolling power outages in other parts of the SPP system. However, that Level 3 alert did not result in outages in our area.

As electric demand continued to increase on the morning of Tuesday, Feb. 16, SPP again issued its highest energy emergency declaration. When it became clear that there was not enough generation on the grid to meet electric demand, SPP asked the Western Area Power Administration to begin controlled rolling outages at around 7:00 a.m. Tuesday, Feb. 16. There wasn't an ability to give consumers advanced warning of the outages.

Will rolling outages continue?

Possibly. With cold weather expected to continue possibly through Wednesday into Thursday, February 18 across the region, there is still a possibility that rolling outages could be needed. These short-term outages are needed to protect the electric grid from longer, more sustained outages.