

Power Outage Tips

Extended power outages in New Mexico, and specifically in Eldorado, have historically been quite rare. In other parts of the country, people regularly experience days of power outages due to extreme weather events such as hurricanes, floods, and windstorms. In New Mexico we are most likely to have outages during the summer monsoon, caused by lightning, and they usually last only a couple of hours.

However in recent years inexplicable power outages seem to be more common. After a 6 ½ hour power outage that affected only three roads in Eldorado on October 2nd, I called PNM the following Monday seeking an explanation. The fact that a power outage in Eldorado in July 2020 is “still under investigation” does not bode well for ever finding a reason. The representative speculated that the outage could have been due to aging infrastructure in our underground utilities, or to rodent damage.

Bearing in mind the cautionary tale of the massive days-long outage in Texas last February, it’s a good time to prepare for short or long interruptions. Luckily, New Mexico is connected to the western grid, so has more resiliency than Texas. But 36% of electrical power in New Mexico came from natural gas-powered generating stations in 2020, and with a worldwide shortage and prices rising from 30-50%—even doubling in some cases—it’s only prudent to be prepared.

If you have solar panels and are connected to the grid for net metering, your power will go out along with everyone else’s unless you have a battery storage system.

Sign up for Power Outage Alerts with PNM

You can sign up for power outage alerts with PNM at <https://www.pnm.com/0316-ew-outage-alerts>

You will get periodic texts letting you know the new time that your power is expected to be restored, and if their website is working and you can access it on a phone or a tablet connected to a cellular system, you can view a map and determine how extensive the outage is.

If you haven’t already signed up with the Santa Fe County reverse 911 emergency alert system you can do so at this link: https://www.santafecountynm.gov/public_safety/recc

Light

Keep a flashlight by your bed, and in logical places easy to find in the dark.

Buy LED lanterns and test them once a month to make sure that the batteries are still good. Keep them in obvious places easy for you and your family members to find in the dark.

Battery backup lightbulbs are available that charge while the lamp is on and will provide up to 6 hours of light in an outage.

Plug-in emergency lights are always charging and will come on in the event of an outage. These are useful in hallways and garages in particular.

If you must use candles, use those that come in a glass. Put them in a fireplace if you have one and aren't using it for warmth. Be very careful of open flames.

Clip-on booklights are handy if you want to read your way through an outage.

Heat

Your gas boiler will go out during an outage. It is not recommended to heat your home with a gas oven, for both fire safety and indoor air pollution reasons.

If you have a fireplace, you can tack up blankets or sheets to make the area that you need to heat smaller.

Phones and Electronics

Most people rely on their cell phones, so it's a good idea to have a portable charger that you keep charged up regularly. Solar chargers are also available. You can always charge your phone off your car battery.

If you still have a landline, an old-fashioned phone that does not rely on electricity but plugs directly into the phone jack will continue working.

A battery back-up system for your computer and printers will keep them running for a couple of hours, and will have plugs for charging other devices. It's a good idea to power down your computer properly while it still has power. These systems, which are also surge protectors, claim to insure your equipment up to a certain amount but do you really want to argue with a corporation when the burden of proof will be on you? It's generally best to unplug sensitive electronic equipment, and anything else you like that is expensive or inconvenient to replace.

In the middle of the night, often your first clue that there is a power outage will be the beeping of your battery back-up system. Some of them beep periodically, a good reason to power down all equipment and unplug the battery backup.

Medical Equipment

If you are medically dependent on electrical equipment, be sure to have have battery backup that will last long enough for you to get through a short outage or get to a location with power.

Water

If you are on a well, you will only have whatever water is in your tank until the power comes back on. If you are on the Eldorado water system, it is heartening to know that the utility is in the midst of comprehensive emergency planning and creating an Emergency Response Plan. General

Manager Steve King says that the utility owns a mobile emergency generator that could be moved around to the area where it is most needed, and that they are considering purchase of a second unit. If there is an outage, be sure to conserve water. Fill up pitchers and kettles, but don't plan on taking a shower.

Cooking

If you have a gas stove or grill, you can light it with a match since the automatic ignition system won't work. An electric kettle or coffee pot can be plugged into a battery backup.

Refrigerators and Freezers

According to the CDC, food should keep in your refrigerator for four hours, and a freezer for up to 48 hours if it is packed full. Avoid opening your refrigerator and freezer unless the outage becomes very extended and you need to cook food that might otherwise spoil.

Generators

There are a variety of generators, from gas and propane to electric that must be kept charged up to solar, but they all have their advantages and disadvantages.

Garage Doors

Consult your owner's manual before a power outage so you know how to disconnect your garage door from the electrical opening system so it can be opened and closed manually. Bear in mind that once you disconnect it, it will no longer be locked.

Natural Gas Outages

Some in Eldorado will remember the widespread natural gas outage in New Mexico in February 2011. Pump stations in Texas failed for various reasons and had no back-up systems, so the gas did not make it much past just north of Santa Fe. People who still had gas were asked to turn down their thermostats and limit cooking, while our neighbors to the north had to wait days until the National Guard went house to house to safely relight heating system pilot lights.

It's a good idea to have sleeping bags and warm comforters and blankets for all family members.

Activities

If it's daytime, go for a walk. If it's evening, pull out your LED lantern and a jigsaw puzzle for the family to work on. Yoga and meditation can pass the time pleasantly, at least for a while. If you have a charger, you can listen to music on your phone or mp3 player. Use your booklight and read yourself to sleep. Cuddle up with family members and animal companions.

And you might as well enjoy the quiet. When the power is out and the refrigerator ceases humming, it can be both disconcerting and peaceful—as long as it doesn't go on too long!

So let's prudently prepare, and hope for the best.

—Debra Denker
Chair, Safety Education Task Group