Sandy Wreaks Havoc Throughout Northeast U.S.

By Erika Bolstad and Chris Adams

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WASHINGTON--Sandy, the massive, multi-state storm that flooded tunnels in New York City, brought snow to the mountains of West Virginia, snarled early voting for the upcoming election and caused more than 8 million power outages, moved into Pennsylvania and western New York on Tuesday and put the entire Northeast on heightened flooding alert.

The storm has had significant impact in at least 10 states and the District of Columbia, and its effects were felt as far west as Chicago, where local emergency officials warned people to stay away from the Lake Michigan lakefront, which was expecting waves of 20 feet or higher.

The storm brought 26 inches of snow to Redhouse, Md., and storm surges 12.5 feet above normal in Kings Point, N.Y., according to AccuWeather.com. Early estimates of its economic impact show Sandy could cause between $5 billion and $10 billion in insured damage, although that's only a fraction of the broader economic losses, which could range from $20 billion to $50 billion or even higher.

The storm was responsible for at least 40 deaths in the U.S., according to the Associated Press.

At one time on Tuesday, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's warning map was coded in a dizzying array of colors: red for blizzards in West Virginia, purple for gale and storm warnings along the coast from Georgia to Maine, green for possible flooding in a dozen states as far west as Ohio, orange for high winds as far north as Michigan.

President Barack Obama issued major disaster declarations in some New York, New Jersey and Connecticut counties. Such declarations, used just once in this administration, when American Samoa was hit with a tsunami in 2009, open the door to additional federal aid.

"Generally we do more thorough assessments and oftentimes these take longer," FEMA Administrator Craig Fugate said in a Tuesday conference call. "But because of the extent of the damages, it was evident to the president after the conversations with the governors that he would do this as a verbal declaration."
FEMA had pre-deployed generators to support states where they need help getting key facilities, such as hospitals, back up and running.

The storm made landfall as a post-tropical cyclone with gusts to hurricane-force winds, according to Jennifer Collins, an associate professor in the department of geography, environment and planning at the University of South Florida in Tampa. Its path was dictated by other weather systems to the west and the east, and Sandy continued to bring heavy rain, high winds and surge to the mid-Atlantic region.

Collins said it was rare for a hurricane originating in the Caribbean to travel the path that Sandy did, moving along a west-northwest track toward the end of its life and hooking toward the northeastern U.S. coastline.

"Having a hurricane travel towards the Northeast states and interact with another storm system is pretty unusual," Collins said.

Among the most shocking images of the storm were from New York City, where the New York Stock Exchange was closed for a second day and water rushed into subway stations and tunnels.

"I am astounded at what I have seen in my own congressional district: flooding throughout Coney Island, Battery Park City, and other areas; widespread power outages; felled trees everywhere you look; and some very tragic fatalities," said U.S. Rep. Jerrold Nadler, a Democrat whose district includes parts of heavily impacted Brooklyn and Manhattan.

New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg, an independent, warned in a news conference that recovery—particularly restoring power and mass transit—would require "a lot of patience." As of Tuesday morning, about three-quarters of a million New Yorkers were without power, he said.

"Make no mistake about it: This was a devastating storm, maybe the worst that we have ever experienced," he said.

At least 10 New Yorkers were killed in the storm, Bloomberg said. Fires destroyed more than 80 houses in the city's Breezy Point neighborhood of the Rockaway Peninsula in Queens. All under-river subway tunnels flooded, he said.

"Clearly, the challenges our city faces in the coming days are enormous," he said.

The city had to evacuate New York University Langone Medical Center after its generators failed. Officials have not yet determined the cause of the failure, Bloomberg said. "While the worst of the storm has passed, conditions are still dangerous," he said. "I can’t stress that enough."

Just south in New Jersey, Republican Gov. Chris Christie and emergency workers assessed the impact of winds and storm surge along the state’s coast, which took the brunt of the storm.

The state reopened the New Jersey Turnpike Tuesday morning after flooding closed portions at the southern end on Monday. But many other roads were washed out or blocked. Christie told private employers that unless they could identify a safe way for employees to get to and from work that they should not reopen.

"No county in the state has been spared," Christie said in a news conference.

More than 2.4 million customers in New Jersey remained without power Tuesday, twice the number who lost electricity after Hurricane Irene last year.

In all, 62 percent of New Jersey customers were without power as of Tuesday morning, according to a summary by the U.S. Department of Energy. That's twice as high as the next highest state: Connecticut, at 31 percent. Most other states in the affected zone had 20 percent or fewer of customers without power.

An aerial assessment by the New Jersey National Guard showed the extent of the devastation. Amusement parks have fallen into the sea, and there’s no place to land a helicopter to inspect state's barrier islands, Christie said.
“The level of devastation at the Jersey shore is unthinkable,” he said. “It is beyond anything I thought I’d ever see. Terrible.”

Well after landfall, other parts of the Northeast were suffering Sandy’s impact. In West Virginia, Gov. Earl Ray Tomblin said in a statement that much of his state on Tuesday was experiencing severe weather, including high winds, flooding and blizzard-like conditions; power and water outages continued to plague many areas.

Volunteer fire and rescue organizations mobilized through the East Coast, reinforcing professional staff in urban areas, while departments established special incident command systems designed to cope with widespread emergencies.

In northern Virginia, Arlington County Fire Department officials, still weary from managing the 30,000 runners of the annual Marine Corps Marathon on Sunday, met Monday to deal with the storm. The call volume was heavy and crews responded to many reports of downed trees and power lines, but by midnight the county had quieted down considerably.

Emergency response teams and task forces converged on the East Coast from throughout the country.

More than 1,500 FEMA workers are positioned along the East Coast to support response operations, including search and rescue, communications and logistical support. They include seven federal urban search and rescue task forces and 14 incident management assistance teams, which identify and coordinate the federal help needed.

FEMA is coordinating with several government agencies and other organizations to handle the Sandy’s aftermath, including the American Red Cross, the Defense Department’s U.S. Northern Command, the National Guard, the Coast Guard, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and the Departments of Health and Human Services and Housing and Urban Development.

About 60 paramedics and EMTs from California’s American Medical Response, for instance, were mobilized by Federal Emergency Management Agency as the Northern California Strike Team and transported to New York City on Saturday. The task force members, half of whom work in California’s northern San Joaquin Valley, undertook missions that included helping evacuate several hundred patients from a New York hospital.

“They’ve been putting in some long hours,” Barry Elzig, general manager for American Medical Response’s San Joaquin County operations, said in a telephone interview Tuesday afternoon.

(Michael Doyle, Lesley Clark and Kaz Komolafe contributed.)

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