

It's been almost a year since Gov. Greg Abbott proclaimed that he and state lawmakers did "everything that needed to be done" to prevent electricity blackouts like the one that left hundreds of Texans dead and millions more shivering in the dark for days during a brutal freeze in 2021.

But as temperatures soared toward triple digits this month and the Texas grid manager twice resorted to urging **conservation** measures normally reserved for summer, Abbott's boast appeared to be little more than hot air. The **conservation** warnings had some Texans bracing for the worst, and it's easy to understand why. The grid reform bill Abbott signed last year fell short of the structural overhaul many experts believe is needed to protect us.

Yes, Abbott and the legislature made modest improvements to the supply side of the grid – mandating new rules to safeguard gas transmission in freezing weather, for example. But they failed to address the demand side by helping to make homes and businesses more energy efficient. Lawmakers also should have encouraged more use of distributed energy, such as generators and solar panels, that could help alleviate strain on our overburdened grid during times of peak demand.

Even as it issues **conservation** notices, the Electricity Reliability Council of Texas – or **ERCOT** – continues to assert that the grid is stable. Naturally, some Texans fear another catastrophe on the scale of the 2021 freeze, when we briefly risked losing electricity for months. They wonder if this problem will ever get fixed. Sadly, experts predict more pain unless politicians confront reality and tackle structural grid problems in earnest.

We hope **ERCOT's** predictions of stability this summer are accurate, but recent events don't inspire confidence. The Texas Tribune reported last week that **ERCOT**, which manages the grid, canceled crucial spring repairs at at least one power plant on May 12 and required it keep producing electricity through the unseasonably hot weather. The plant broke down under the strain, as did five others that were asked to postpone maintenance. An **ERCOT** spokesperson denied that maintenance delays caused the failures, but power plant officials said they know better.

Record heat in early and mid-May triggered those two **ERCOT** notices urging Texans to raise their thermostats and turn off major appliances. Brad Jones, **ERCOT's** interim CEO, insisted last week that the May 13 **conservation** notice was just an informal "request to help us out."

Are any Texans actually buying this? It's past time that Abbott, **ERCOT** and the Texas Public Utility Commission come clean about the severity of our grid problems and what it will cost to fix them. Texas energy capacity is strained. Climate change is driving longer, hotter Texas summers. Our population is soaring as new companies, including energy-devouring tech firms, arrive. Abbott, who is seeking reelection, refused to call lawmakers back to Austin for a special session to fix the grid last year. Texans are still waiting for him to confront this looming crisis with the urgency it requires.

Texas is not plugged into the national energy grid, making us an outlier that can draw only very limited amounts of electricity from other states during extreme hot and cold weather, when energy demand is high and reserves are low. That's something Beto O'Rourke, Abbott's Democratic challenger in the November election, vows to change if elected. But Ed Hirs, a University of Houston energy economics professor who predicted our current grid travails a decade ago, said it would take five years, at minimum, to make that complex shift. That's assuming Texas lawmakers, who are notoriously averse to federal oversight, would agree to do it.

"It's going to take probably a series of catastrophes and tragedies before we have any political integrity," Hirs ominously told our board last week.

In the near-term, the PUC should work with utilities to quickly develop incentives for conserving energy at critical times. Prodding residents to program their internet-wired thermostats in a way that reduces energy use during peak demand would help. So would urging HVAC companies to step up production of efficient and

cost-saving heating and cooling systems that use less energy.

These initiatives could help relieve some strain on the grid, but more comprehensive solutions are needed. Abbott, ERCOT, and the Public Utility Commission should level with Texans and admit the grid is broken, then set about fixing it with the urgency it demands. Hundreds of people died the last time the grid failed. Texas can't allow that to happen again.

CITATION (CMS STYLE)

"Abbott and ERCOT should come clean: Grid not fixed - And unless problems earnestly addressed, it won't get fixed." *Austin American-Statesman (TX)*, May 22, 2022: A13. *NewsBank: Access World News*. <https://infoweb-newsbank-com.atxlibrary.idm.oclc.org/apps/news/document-view?p=AWNB&docref=news/18A281CC6531D1F0>.

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