

Power outage causes chaos

By Erika Dahlby Jackson Hole Daily | Posted: Thursday, February 9, 2017 4:30 am

Update, 4:50 p.m.: Lower Valley Energy was able to restore power to Teton Village Fire Department and its facilities. That will allow the volunteer staff to aid in emergency operations.

Crews are continuing to work to restore power to the Solitude subdivision. Currently power has been restored to a third of the area.

Update, 10:35 a.m. Thursday: Lower Valley Energy has begun the process of restoring the 17 steel transmission poles that toppled over in a windstorm Tuesday night.

With help from five neighboring utility companies and the mountain operations crew from Jackson Hole Mountain Resort, crews were able to dig 9-foot holes into the ground to being setting foundations for temporary wooden poles, according to a press release.

Lower Valley Energy has enough poles to complete the restoration, but deteriorating weather conditions are adding complexity.

Crews were able to restore power to most areas around the airport yesterday, but Solitude still remains without power.

Crews were not successful in returning power to the Teton Village Fire Department and facilities yesterday due to other outages in the valley, but it's a priority for today.

Both Lower Valley Energy crews and Jackson Hole Mountain Resort are asking people to please avoid travelling to Teton Village. The roads are hazardous due to excessive water and snow, and the power crews need room to work.

Original story: Teton Village remains without power after 17 75-foot-tall steel transmission towers toppled Tuesday night.

"They took each other out," Lower Valley Energy spokesman Brian Tanabe said.

The destruction left behind is going to require a major cleanup effort, Tanabe said, and it could take five to seven days to restore power to Teton Village.

Crews have started to set wooden poles in place of the broken steel towers. It's a temporary fix, though, until new steel transmission lines can be installed this summer.

"It will be able to hold and distribute all the power we need until the summer," Tanabe said of the



Teton Village power outage

Seventeen steel power poles along Highway 390 south of Teton Village were blown down in Tuesday night's storm.

wooden replacements.

Replacing the downed poles isn't the only problem utility crews are dealing with.

The last standing pole is a little off center, Tanabe said, and needs to be stabilized. Tanabe said Lower Valley crews are also trying to get power restored to the Teton Village Fire Department so it can aid in the emergency response around the area.

Five neighboring utility companies — High Plains Power, Idaho Falls Power, Fall River Rural Electric, Bonneville Power and Wasatch Energy, along with the crews from Jackson Hole Mountain Resort — are assisting with manpower and equipment.

As of Wednesday evening power had been rerouted to most areas surrounding Jackson Hole Airport, and the airport was fully operational with its own backup generator.

Tanabe did not have an exact number, but the estimate of people without power dropped below 3,500 on Wednesday afternoon.

Though details aren't known, Lower Valley pointed to Tuesday's high winds as the almost certain cause of the downing.

Teton County Sheriff's Office Sgt. Matt Carr, who was on scene Tuesday night, said he had never experienced winds in the valley like those that were blowing. Gusts as high as 75 mph were clocked at the top of the Aerial Tram on Tuesday evening.

"To see those huge steel power poles folded," Carr said, "it's amazing."

The steel poles that went down are 40 years old, which isn't that old for transmission poles, Tanabe said.

Most power lines people see are smaller distribution lines, Tanabe said, and power can more easily be rerouted to affected areas served by those kinds of lines.

According to Lower Valley Energy, transmission lines feed power to substations, which then distribute it to customers. When the transmission system fails, the line must be entirely repaired instead of just rerouting power.

There is no evacuation order in place for Teton Village, but, Carr said, "the Village is turning into a ghost town right now."

Hotels in the Village emptied Wednesday, and Jackson lodges said they were quickly filled with evacuees.

Jackson Hole Mountain Resort is working with a skeleton crew, spokeswoman Anna Cole said. Ski patrol went on the mountain on Wednesday to check for downed trees and make sure none of the lifts were damaged.

The ski resort will not operate through the weekend. All events, including a skijoring contest and the Wyoming Special Olympics alpine events, have been canceled.

“Safety is the biggest concern,” Cole said.

Cole said no uphill travel is allowed at the resort.

“We do not need people in avalanche paths,” she said. “It’s making our patrol do more work than necessary and they need to focus on keeping the mountain safe.”

Teton Pass closed at 2:30 a.m. on Tuesday and has not reopened since. The most recent estimate is after 8 a.m. today. But with a winter storm warning in effect until 5 p.m. Friday it may not stay open, said WYDOT avalanche technician Jamie Yount.

“Even if we do get it open it won’t be open for very long,” Yount said.

On Tuesday night at least six avalanches released naturally on the west side of Teton Pass, leaving 12 to 15 feet of debris on the road. Green trees were mixed with the snow, making the cleanup more difficult. Crews are working with three rotary plows and one loader.

“We understand it’s trying and taxing on everyone,” Yount said.

Heavy rain and strong winds are expected to hit the area starting today, and that’s going to make traveling treacherous. A flood watch is in effect through tonight.

“I would encourage people to not use the highway system today,” Yount said.

Several smaller avalanches were reported in the Snake River Canyon on Wednesday, and a larger avalanche in the Hoback Canyon closed the road on Tuesday night.

“Rain on new snow is guaranteed avalanches every time,” Yount said.

The moisture and precipitation is creating the perfect recipe for avalanches, WYDOT spokeswoman Stephanie Harsha said.

“Anytime that you have snow accumulation and rain and water on top of it, it just creates a nightmare for drivers,” Harsha said.

WYDOT has issued a “no unnecessary travel” order on highways, meaning that if you can stay home, you should.

Technically the roads are open, Harsha said, but if conditions deteriorate crews won’t hesitate to close them.

“We’re taking it day by day,” she said.

Because of the pass closure START bus services have been affected.

In-town service and service to Teton Village is running as normal, Director Darren Brugmann said, but commuter lines are running differently.

Buses coming to and from Victor, Idaho, are having to reroute through Alpine.

“We’re pretty much at the mercy of WYDOT if they close the pass. It’s like a two-hour ride,” Brugmann

said. “But there are some people that depend on getting over here.”

START will waive fares for all bus services starting today and continuing through the end of the day on Sunday. For up-to-date schedules and service alerts visit StartBus.com.

— *Emily Mieure and Richard Anderson contributed to this story.*