

Q&A based on Customer Issues

Why did it take so long to get my power back?

Hurricane Irene had a devastating effect on Virginia and North Carolina. We experienced approximately 30 hours of sustained high winds, with gusts of up to 75 miles per hour. More than 1.2 million customers lost electric service as a result.

Even before the winds and rain had ended, Dominion Virginia Power workers began assessing the damage and crews started making repairs.

The first priority after any storm is responding to scenes where the public could be in danger, such as live wires on streets. The restoration effort then focuses on restoring service to “critical services,” which includes 911 centers, hospitals, water pumping stations, etc. This is typically accomplished by working on main lines along major roads. An added benefit of this work is the restoration of service to the large groups of customers who are on or near those roads. The next step is to work on major lines that feed the largest groups of customers, such as major subdivisions. The final leg of the process is restoring service to small groups or individual customers.

The damage caused by Hurricane Irene was monumental. Repairs had to be made at more than 30,000 work locations.

We certainly understand the inconvenience and frustration you endured. We regret that the duration of the outage for many customers was so long due to the catastrophic damage from Irene.

Why did my estimated restoration time keep changing?

We know that the changing restoration time was frustrating for customers. An estimated time of restoration, or “ETR,” was based on the best information we had available. This included customers calling in to report their outages and what our patrollers and line crews saw in the field. From that, we developed a restoration plan and estimated when service could be returned to individual customers. Unfortunately, sometimes we found damage at a repair location that we did not know about when the ETR was established. It took longer than planned to repair that site and caused delays for repairs scheduled later that day. There also are instances in which repairs were made and then it was discovered that there was additional damage down the line that was preventing service from being restored.

We certainly regret that we were not able to provide better restoration estimates to the 1.2 million customers whose power was affected by the devastation caused by Hurricane Irene. We tried all week to use our current information processes to provide customers with an ETR. Unfortunately, the processes did not perform as we intended in this extraordinary event. Ultimately, we stopped providing specific estimated times of restoration to customers still without service on Friday, September 2.

We will, as with every major storm event, conduct a post-storm evaluation to improve our service in this area. This will include examining how other utilities provide ETRs to see if there is a better way.

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Why did Dominion vehicles come to our neighborhood but did not stop?

Your concerns are understandable about seeing Dominion vehicles drive past your house during an outage without stopping. To assess outages following a storm, patrollers scout the damage before work can begin. This is why you may have seen Dominion trucks pass through your neighborhood without stopping to work on power lines. The information they gathered is used to plan repairs and disseminate work crews.

During a major restoration effort, the majority of our line crews work to restore main lines and critical service locations (such as hospitals, emergency response locations, and water-pumping stations) initially. They may drive past some storm damage to get to repair locations that can help larger groups of customers. Residential repairs are then grouped to restore the greatest number of customers at a time.

Did Dominion's plan include having enough people to handle the storm?

Dominion began tracking and planning its response to Hurricane Irene a week before it arrived. In all, more than 7,000 people were on hand to respond. This includes Dominion employees and retirees as well as employees of other utilities and contractors from many other states. Dominion's response has been a 24/7 operation, with individual shifts of as much as 16 hours a day.

Hurricane Irene was the second-largest weather event in our company's 100-year history, topped only by Hurricane Isabel in 2003. With Hurricane Isabel, it took more than two weeks to restore service to the 1.8 million customers who lost service. With Hurricane Irene, we are on track to have restored service to 1.2 million customers in about half that time. While the level of damage caused by Isabel no doubt was greater, the comparison provides some benchmark for our restoration effort for this storm.

Why did more customers in Central Virginia lose power than in Hampton Roads, where the winds were higher?

The National Weather Service said that while the winds were stronger near the coast, the tropical-force winds lasted longer in Central Virginia. Also, the tree canopy in this region is generally higher and more dense. Those factors resulted in overall damage being more severe in Central Virginia, similar in some pockets to what we saw with Hurricane Isabel. That caused higher outage numbers and a more difficult restoration.

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Why did I have to wait so long to talk to a person when I called?

Dominion Virginia Power utilizes an automated system (IVR) to allow our customers to report their outages. As you might imagine, during a widespread outage event thousands of calls are frequently received simultaneously. The volume of calls far exceeds our capacity to answer them with an associate in a timely manner. Our automated outage reporting system virtually guarantees no busy signals will be delivered and that all callers can promptly report their outages or obtain updates that may be available, without experiencing wait times. This system also speeds up the identification of the magnitude of the outages and their locations, which provides for a quicker assessment and deployment of our line crews.

Our Customer Care Center is always fully staffed around-the-clock during major storm events. However, depending on the timing of calls during the restoration process, volume may be extremely high. Under these circumstances, customers routed to an associate may experience lengthy hold times unique to that storm event. We certainly apologize to any of our customers who may have experienced a lengthy wait time during this event. All customers may be assured that our Customer Care Center is committed to being readily available to all callers, and that the wait times that were periodically experienced during Hurricane Irene were unique to the magnitude of the storm, and not indicative of typical service levels.

Why don't medical condition customers get top priority in getting their power back?

We are very concerned about the wellbeing of all customers, especially those most vulnerable to being without power. We have a program for the elderly and medical conditions customers that provides for noting accounts if certain medical conditions exist. If the account is noted, customers are notified prior to an impending storm that a possible long-term outage may result and that they should make appropriate arrangements. This notification was provided to medical condition customers two days prior to the onset of Hurricane Irene. Certification by an attending physician is required to enroll in this program. Any customer interested may contact us at 1-866-DOM-HELP (1-866-366-4357) to obtain an enrollment form. This proactive program allows us to focus our post-storm efforts first on public safety and restoring service to hospitals and other critical services, and then to getting every customer back in service as soon as possible.