

Amid statewide emergency declared by Oregon governor, Clackamas County declining help for now

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Gov. Tina Kotek declared a state of emergency this week as winter ice continued to wreak havoc across Oregon.

Snow, ice and wind knocked out power to thousands, and more than a dozen have died due to hypothermia, traffic crashes, fallen trees and other weather-related deaths.

Multnomah, Lincoln, Washington and Hood River counties, and the Confederated Tribes of Siletz Indians have declared a local state of emergency and have been receiving support from the state, according to the governor's office.

"Thousands of people across the state have been impacted by the storm, including power outages, lack of transportation, and an array of safety concerns that come with severe weather," Gov. Kotek said in a statement. "The state has been working with counties as they assess needs, including critical federal resources that can be unlocked by a statewide emergency. I declared a state of emergency in Lane County on Tuesday, and now we are heeding the call from additional counties to escalate."

Along with power outages across the state, there has been freezing rain, high winds, landslides and avalanches. Schools have been closed and in some areas, there has been a loss of 911 services.

So far, Clackamas County is not on the list as a local jurisdiction that has requested help.

Clackamas County Chair Tootie Smith has not ruled out the possibility that her county will need help, but so far the county is managing.

"We've gone to the school of hard knocks on our response to disasters," Smith said. "We've had several in the past three years and I suppose experiences are the best teachers."

In the winter of 2021, a similar forecast of ice and snow hit Clackamas County hard.

This time around, "when we knew this storm was coming, we deployed," Smith said.

The county has a disaster management system that helps coordinate with all other county services: from the sheriff's office and human services, to the road department, housing and medical services. All agencies can now communicate with each other in real time, the county chair said. They scattered snow plows across the county and pre-sanded roads. And Smith said they've worked with the power company in the past couple of years to replace old poles and ensure trees are trimmed.

Kotek's state of emergency declaration directs all state agencies to allocate resources to help local communities — assistance that can range from state personnel to equipment and facilities. A state emergency declaration can also help local communities tap federal funds to help recover from a disaster.

Smith acknowledged residents in her county have been impacted by the storm; Clackamas County has seen widespread power outages, frozen pipes in residences and fire crews have been responding to water damage and vehicle accidents. The county has helped hundreds of people find warm shelter in churches and motels and has opened a resource center at Mt. Hood Lions Club in Welches to provide potable water, food and other emergency services for residents.

But she also said the last three years of preparing for emergencies has proven helpful.

"I always say, don't sit in the cold, dark house expecting the government to save you," Smith said. "And I apply that to myself at Clackamas County, I can't wait for the state or federal government to come save me."