

A truck trying to avoid a wrecked vehicle slides as snow begins to accumulate Tuesday in Clanton, Ala. Winter weather caused several closures along Interstate 65 in Alabama. BUTCH DILL/AP

Deep South shuts down as rare snow, ice hit region

Louisiana, Georgia, S. Carolina declare states of emergency

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USA TODAY

ATLANTA A "historic" winter storm engulfed the Deep South on Tuesday, bringing rare snow and the danger of icy roads to areas not accustomed to battling it and causing massive traffic problems across the region.

Snow flurries and sleet fell in Houston and its northern suburbs, and ice on overpasses made driving treacherous. Motorists from Texas to Virginia were warned to stay off the roads, while Louisiana and South Carolina declared states of emergency.

Georgia Gov. Nathan Deal also declared a state of emergency for the entire state late Tuesday afternoon. Throughout the state, some wireless phone customers lost service Tuesday during the storm because thousands of gridlocked drivers and worried parents overwhelmed cellphone towers.

Popular warm-weather tourist destinations, including New Orleans and some Florida beaches, expected ice and snow over the next two days.

The weather caused more than 3,400 commercial flights to be canceled, and an additional 2,000 saw major delays, according to Flightstats.com.

"This is a historic storm, for its size," said meteorologist Mike Smith of AccuWeather Enterprise Solutions.

In Atlanta, one to three inches of snowfall caused massive traffic problems. Thousands of schoolchildren dismissed early, commuters who worked half a day and motorists driving too fast for conditions all combined to turn freeways and major roads into parking lots. At least 900 flights through Atlanta were among those canceled.

Officials said hundreds of students may have to spend the night in classrooms or gyms.

"They have food, and we have gas heat, and the electricity is on," DeKalb County Emergency Management Director Anthony Clifton said.

In Alabama, the state House of Representatives adjourned for the day because of the weather.

"There's not enough of us here today," said Rep. Dimitri Polizos, R-Montgomery. "It's crazy weather, and we can't control it."

A hard freeze was forecast across the South, along with heavy snow to some areas, particularly along the Carolina Coast and in Virginia, where a foot of snow was expected. There was a threat of icy roads in Austin, Texas; Charleston, S.C.; Pensacola, Fla.; Mobile, Ala.; and New Orleans.

"This is a very dangerous situation because snow and ice are very rare for extreme southern Mississippi," said Robert Latham, executive director of the Mississippi Emergency Management Agency. "We need everyone to have an emergency plan together for this."

The storm will slowly move off the Southeast coast on Wednesday morning, the weather service reports. Snow, sleet and freezing rain will wind down in eastern portions of the Carolinas, southern Georgia and the panhandle of Florida by midday.

After a chilly start, temperatures are forecast to rise above freezing throughout the Southeast by early afternoon. Even warmer weather is on the way for Thursday in the South.

In declaring a state of emergency in Louisiana, Gov. Bobby Jindal warned that heavy snow and freezing temperatures could paralyze most roadways.

All federal government buildings and public schools in New Orleans were closed Tuesday, as were City Park and New Orleans Municipal Court.

The inclement weather also postponed the federal corruption trial of former Mayor Ray Nagin, which began Monday with jury selection.

IN THE MIDWEST

The harsh cold pushing into the South is an extension of the hard freeze that has gripped the Midwest for days.

- Schools in Chicago were closed for a second day Tuesday, while in Minnesota, most metro schools and the University of Minnesota closed as wind chills were expected to drop as low as 35 to 50 degrees below zero.
- The state was also struggling with a short supply of natural gas in some parts because of a Canadian pipeline explosion. Xcel Energy asked all customers, including those in the Twin Cities, to cut back on natural gas use and hold their home thermostats at 60 degrees.