

## Ice storm—Ontario, Quebec and New Brunswick (1998)



The ice storm in Eastern Canada in 1998 caused millions of trees to fall over, and thousands of utility poles were knocked down.

Guess what the most expensive natural disaster in Canadian history might be. A massive earthquake? A hurricane? Maybe a flood? The answer is none of these—rather, it was freezing rain. When the air is warm in winter, precipitation sometimes falls as rain, turning to ice as it hits the cold ground and any objects on its surface, including trees, houses, cars and hydroelectric transmission wires. If the freezing rain lasts, ice accumulates. Such an event is known as an ice storm. The most expensive Canadian natural disaster was an ice storm that occurred in January 1998 that left a huge swath of land stretching from Kitchener, Ontario, in the west through Quebec to New Brunswick and Nova Scotia in the east in a layer of ice. While most ice storms last a few hours, this one lasted 80 hours, more than three days.

During this massive ice storm, the weight of the ice caused millions of trees to fall over, and thousands of utility poles and hydroelectric transmission wires were knocked down. Transmission towers were also destroyed—130,000 of them, according to some estimates—and power outages were widespread. Over four million people lost power, and, in rural areas, 700,000 people remained without power for up to a month. The estimated cost of the ice storm was more than \$5 billion. More than 250 communities declared a disaster.

Twenty-eight people lost their lives and 945 others were injured during the storm. Because of the continuing cold weather without power, 600,000 people left their homes seeking warmth and food. The situation was dire for farmers, who had no power to operate their equipment. Millions of litres of milk had to be dumped. The maple syrup industry also suffered, because many maples were among the downed trees.

The ice storm was caused by the meeting of a large cell of warm air and a cold front. There was little wind, which allowed the storm to stall over the region, hence its unusual length.

The Canadian military forces were called in to assist with the disaster. Sixteen thousand soldiers cleared away debris, went door to door to ask if people needed help, and evacuated people as required. Power companies all over North America rallied to help restore power.

### Additional reading

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