Filing Receipt

Filing Date - 2024-09-25 03:44:02 PM

Control Number - 56822

Item Number - 188

NEXTLINK INTERNET RESPONSE

PROJECT NO. 56822

COMMISSION STAFF'S FIRST REQUEST FOR INFORMATION TO TARGETED TELECOMMUNICATION UTILITIES QUESTION NOS. STAFF 1-1 THROUGH 1-16

Nextlink Internet (Nextlink) supports the Texas PUC staff inquiry regarding Beryl. Nextlink provides internet and voice service as a certified telecommunications provider to some of the most hard-to-serve and remote areas of Texas, serving customers from the Oklahoma border, down to the Gulf, and west of Midland.

While Beryl did not substantially impact the Nextlink provisioning of internet access to rural Texans in the Impacted Area, we did experience some impact to our operations due to the hurricane. The responses below are based on the best information available to us from both our internal systems and interactions with third parties.

Staff 1-1 Did you experience any disruption of service or service outages within the Impacted Area due to damage caused by Hurricane Beryl? If so, please describe the nature and causes of the outages, the duration of any outages, facilities affected by the outages, and efforts made by you and any involved third parties to restore service to customers in the Impacted Area.

Nextlink experienced outages at 58 distinct equipment locations, impacting infrastructure that served a total of 1,077 subscribers. Of the equipment impacted, only 473 customers had intermittent service or an outage because of the storm. This is due to redundant and backup systems designed to mitigate impacts of outages. The causes of these outages ranged from power failures to equipment damage due to extreme weather conditions.

The most common reason for a customer-impacting outage was an electrical service outage that outlasted our backup capacity. For example, we had several power outages where power to a tower site was out for several days, which impacted our ability to serve customers.

Staff 1-2 Did you experience any disruption of service or service outages in areas of Texas outside the Impacted Area due to damage caused by Hurricane Beryl? If so, please describe the nature and causes of the outages, the duration of any outages, facilities affected by the outages, and efforts made by you and any involved third parties to restore service to customers in those affected areas.

Based on the information available at the time, we did not experience any disruptions outside of the Impacted Area due to Hurricane Beryl.

Staff 1-3 If any outages due to a third-party infrastructure issue were caused by the impact of Hurricane Beryl, please identify the third party and describe the issue(s) and what steps were taken to resolve it and restore service to customers.

Several impacts were the result of interruption in third party electrical service provided to our tower sites, as well as one impact from a fiber backhaul provider whose service went down. As mentioned previously, due to redundant and backup systems, not all of these resulted in customers being hard down. In all of these scenarios, whether customer impacting or not, the Nextlink NOC proactively reaches out to the third party to inform them of the issue, and stays in touch with them to ensure appropriate resolution.

We did have impact events caused by intermittent or downed electrical service through Bluebonnet Electric Cooperative, San Bernard Electric Cooperative, Entergy, Bryan Texas Utilities, Center Point Electric, AEP, and MidSouth Electric.

Staff 1-4 Please describe the extent of any structural damage to your facility(s) due to Hurricane Beryl.

Nextlink Internet had no major structural damage as a result of Hurricane Beryl. However, multiple sensitive electronics were impacted and needed to be replaced.

Staff 1-5 Please identify the total number of customers affected by Hurricane Beryl-related outages, categorized by service type and zip code.

All impacted 1077 customers were to subscribers of fixed wireless broadband internet services. Customers were located in the following zip codes: 77320, 77957, 75125, 78634, 76849, 77426, 77845, 77880, 77871, 75850, 75494, 75468, 77474, 78932, 77833, 75455, 77418, 76629, 78950, 77836, 77835, 78636, 75161, 79601, 79720, 76624, 76448, 75169, 77414, 76831, 78643, 79556, 76050, 75109, 75152, 77437, 76821, 76825, 76856, 76834, 76501, 77340, 75852, 76854, 77868, 77872, 75783, 78942, 76664, 75472, 76064, 75110, 75165, 76934, 76823, 76502, 76859, 77864, 78946, 76682, 76648, 75144, 79567, 76569, 78631, 77831, 76705, 76673, 75153, 76706, 76676, and 76691.

Staff 1-6 Please provide a timeline outlining the progression of any Hurricane Beryl-related outages experienced by your utility from the initial disruption to complete restoration.

Our first network impact associated with Beryl began with a non-customer impacting outage on July 6, 2024 at 12:25am where cabling at a tower in Coleman needed to be replaced due to water intrusion. Our first hard-down customer issue occurred at 3:39pm where a power inconsistency issue caused a breaker to trip at one of our tower sites. From there a series of power, fiber backhaul, and equipment issues continued until the last outage ticket related to the storm was closed the evening of July 9, 2024 at when the equipment at a tower site was replaced due to storm damage.

Staff 1-7 Please identify any challenges or obstacles that hindered your service restoration efforts.

Power outages and weather were the major factors hindering restoration. For example, to replace a wireless access point on a tower it must be safe to climb. High winds and thunderstorm activity are weather criteria that make it physically unsafe to climb a tower.

Staff 1-8 Please describe any communications you had with AEP, CenterPoint, Entergy, or TNMP in advance of Hurricane Beryl concerning potential loss of power or electric service.

We did not have advance communications with the named electric utilities in the area. Our infrastructure is typically serviced by rural electric cooperatives or municipal utilities.

Staff 1-9 Please detail the communication strategies you employed to inform your customers about the outage, restoration progress, and estimated timelines, including communication channels used.

Nextlink has an app and customer facing website through which customers can opt-in to receive text, email, or push notifications about outages as well as their resolution. This is the fastest way for customers to be notified about information regarding outages.

We employed a multi-channel approach to keep our customers informed during Hurricane Beryl, though this process is not limited to specific events. This included email notifications, text alerts regarding outages once cleared, and regular updates on our website. Our communications provided details about outages, restoration progress, and estimated restoration timelines. Additionally, we ensured that our IVR system was regularly updated with the latest information, and for larger impacted areas, we maintained consistent communication with our NOC through bridge calls.

Staff 1-10 Please describe the customer support measures in place to address inquiries, concerns, and complaints related to the outages, specifying the availability of support channels and response times.

Our customer support team was accessible via phone, email, and live chat to address any inquiries, concerns, or complaints regarding the outages. We prioritized prompt response times, and additional staffing was in place to manage the increased volume of support requests. Since we typically have more staff on Mondays, we were adequately staffed, but our response times saw a spike, increasing to 1 minute 45 seconds on Monday and 1 minute 23 seconds on Tuesday, compared to our usual 45 seconds. Our total interaction volume increased from the regular 600 interactions to over 1,000 on both days.

Staff 1-11 Please outline any proactive outreach efforts your utility makes to vulnerable customers (e.g., elderly, disabled) who may require additional assistance during a weather emergency.

Nextlink prioritizes customer care, which is one the reasons why the company has a 4.8 out of 5 star rating on Google, and an A+ rating with the Better Business Bureau. We address vulnerable customers both with proactive outreach via multiple channels of communication insofar as they have opted into those communication methods.

Staff 1-12 Please describe the lessons learned from Hurricane Beryl's impact on your facilities, network infrastructure, and service delivery.

Hurricane Beryl had a relatively minimal impact on our facilities and service availability. In fact, it was a testament to the ability of our existing systems and protections to largely keep Nextlink's substantial subscriber base in Texas connected despite the adverse weather events.

Staff 1-13 Please outline any plans or initiatives to enhance your network's resilience to future natural disasters, including specific infrastructure upgrades or redundancy measures.

Nextlink has historically invested in resilient infrastructure and will continue to do so. For example, Nextlink wireless tower sites have at least 2 connections to other towers for redundancy. In addition to 8+ hours of backup power, Nextlink has a strict 4- hour SLA in the event of a complete site outage.

Likewise, Nextlink's fiber infrastructure have redundant power control systems which will afford them 8+ hours of uptime. In the event of the loss of communication or degeneration of service, the NOC will receive an automatic notification to alert on-call field technicians to bring temporary power solutions to the site.

Staff 1-14 Please describe any investments in emergency preparedness and response capabilities, such as backup power systems, redundant communication channels, or disaster recovery plans.

Where possible, the company invests in redundant connectivity as well as generators and/or battery backup systems to ensure that remote electronics are powered during interruptions in electrical service.

Nextlink has a network operations center that is staffed 24/7 to respond to any network issues that may arise, including weather-related outages. When equipment goes offline, the NOC is automatically notified and will dispatch field technicians to immediately fix the issue. In addition, Nextlink has access to advanced weather mapping software that notifies the NOC of the location of lightning strikes and other weather events.

Staff 1-15 Please provide a summary of any vegetation management program run by your utility to ensure adequate right of way clearance for your communications facilities.

Most of our fiber optic infrastructure is buried, and the remainder is on third-party utility poles.

Staff 1-16 Has your utility conducted any studies that examine the costs and benefits of burying communications facilities in weather-volatile areas of the state? If so, please provide an executive summary from the most recent study.

We have not conducted a study, but most of our fiber optic infrastructure is buried.