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Why the winter storm that's about to hit could be especially treacherous for flying

The massive storm presents a logistics puzzle for airlines, in part because it will also affect airports in the South. Expect horror stories.

By [Claudia Assis](#) Follow

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Airports in the South may not be as prepared for winter weather as those in other parts of the country, like Denver.

You don't need a PhD to understand

Referenced Symbols

↓ **LUV -1.15%** ↓ **AAL -2.33%** ↓ **JETS -1.11%**

U.S. airlines are likely to face a brutal test over the weekend as snowstorms and arctic air predicted to blanket large swaths of the U.S. will begin to impact their operations as early as Friday.

A couple of airlines have already issued weather advisories ahead of what the National Weather Service is calling a [“large, long-duration winter storm.”](#)

This storm presents a particularly complicated logistics puzzle for airlines operations because it is expected to affect parts of the South as well as areas more used to winter weather, said Ernest Arvai, president of AirInsight Group.

Airports in the South may not be as prepared to handle severe winter weather as Northern and Midwestern airports, in terms of both available equipment and know-how.

The storm is expected to bring widespread heavy snow, sleet and freezing rain to parts of the South on Friday and then spread eastward over the weekend, according to the National Weather Service. Extreme cold warnings are also in effect for parts of the Midwest and South.

Southwest Airlines ↓ **LUV -1.15%** and American Airlines ↓ **AAL -2.33%** have issued travel advisories for the weekend, telling some customers they can rebook without penalties. Shares of U.S. airlines spent most of Thursday in the black alongside the

broader equity market but turned lower as the closing bell approached, with the U.S. Global Jets exchange-traded fund **↓ JETS -1.11%** lower.

Plummeting temperatures make it harder to de-ice aircraft, Arvai said. De-icing agents usually have a short window to remain effective, measured in minutes from takeoff, he said.

And once a flight is canceled, there's very little slack in the system for rebookings, presenting additional challenges for airlines and passengers.

Load factors around the 90th percentile mean that most U.S. flights have under a dozen seats available, making rebooking and recovery from any flight cancellations slow.

"It can take multiple days to get people to their destinations," Arvai said. That's when people might expect to see some horror stories about travelers stuck in airports for hours, if not days. "When something goes wrong, it's not easy to recover from that, because you don't have that many extra seats," he said.

AccuWeather predicted late Thursday that some 6,000 U.S. flights might be canceled over the weekend through Monday.

"It is rare for a storm to combine this much snow, ice and bitter cold over such a large area — a widespread travel-halting winter storm will stall daily life for days," AccuWeather said.

A corridor of damaging freezing rain and ice extending from northern Texas to the Carolinas is also worrying for its potential to trigger "widespread and long-lasting power outages," it said.

Analysts at Jefferies recalled in a note earlier Thursday the havoc on the power grid, especially in Texas, caused by Winter Storm Uri in 2021. Since then, power companies and midstream companies have made investments to prevent a repeat, although "freezing infrastructure is always a risk."

Natural-gas futures in New York rose more than 6% on Thursday on fears of potential shortages ahead of plummeting temperatures, [capping a third session of gains that pushed prices up more than 60% for the best three-day stretch on record.](#)

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