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FEATURED

## 'It's a miracle that no lives were lost;' EF-3 tornado hits 63 buildings, injuring 23, along 8-mile route

BY ERIC E. GARCIA | TELEGRAM CITY EDITOR

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1 of 18



Residents examine debris at a destroyed home in the Salado area.

Shane Monaco | Telegram

A powerful EF-3 tornado, with winds up to 165 mph, swept into Bell County Tuesday night and carved a path of destruction along its eight-mile route – reducing homes to rubble, slicing down large trees and power lines, and injuring 23 people, one critically.

Amazingly, no fatalities were immediately reported as responders from multiple agencies canvassed damaged neighborhoods, including the Salado and Youngsport areas, Bell County Judge David Blackburn said during news conferences Tuesday night and Wednesday.

"It is not, in any sense, a minor miracle that we did not have any deaths associated with the event," Blackburn said at a news conference Wednesday morning in Salado. "If you look at the devastation created last night, it is hard to imagine that (deaths) did not occur."

The severe weather prompted Blackburn to issue a disaster declaration Wednesday that will enable property owners and others to apply for state and possible federal relief funds. The order is in effect for seven days.

The judge said it was undetermined if Federal Emergency Management Agency funds would be available for Bell County residents.

"That is one of the reasons I issued a disaster declaration and one of the reason I would encourage property owners to report their damages," he said. "There is a threshold that we have to meet statewide in order for those funding opportunities to kick in for property owners. It is in everyone's best interest to be reporting (damages)."

The tornado damage — which included hail up to grapefruit-size — could have been much worse, Blackburn said.

Weather radar showed the tornado was on a direct path to the village of Salado before it took an abrupt sharp left turn and dissipated near Stillhouse Hollow Lake.

Sixty-three buildings — including two churches and 61 homes — were hit by the tornado's touchdown in Salado, resulting in numerous injuries, officials said.

"Twelve have been transported to area hospitals, one I'm told in critical condition," Blackburn said. "The other 11 were either not transported or treated and released from the hospital."

Rescue and debris clearing operations that began Tuesday night continued Wednesday.

"Power lines, debris, (and) trees are all scattered across roadways and properties," Blackburn said.

The Bartlett Electric Cooperative, which provides electricity to the Salado area, reported 638 power outages. Crews were working to clear roads and restore power, officials said.

Emergency responders conducted walk-arounds and walk-throughs at properties to assess injuries and damage. Social media photographs showed Salado area homes with roofs and walls heavily damaged. Metal and other debris was scattered along the tornado's path, which the National Weather Service initially said had "significant strength."

Resident Brenda Cox said her Salado area home was spared by the tornado, although the building was pounded by hail.

"We had hail between the size of a baseball and a softball," she said. "We just had a new roof put on. I'm pretty sure we're going to need another new roof put on."

Kenneth Wigley said he learned about the tornado while visiting a nearby town.

"We were in Jarrell last night when the tornado came," he said. "My house is nearby. The tornado turned and went the other way. My mother's house and my sister's are near too, and they were spared."

"It is a miracle that no lives were lost."

### **Tornado's formation**

The tornado "popped up fairly quickly," forming over northern Williamson County near the intersection of County Road 228 and State Highway 195, Blackburn said.

It was nearly a mile wide and traveled for about 3½ miles through Williamson County, causing damage between Florence and Jarrell, before moving into Bell County.

The tornado then traveled along FM 2843 west of Cedar Valley, scarring the land from the county line northeast to the Hidden Springs subdivision near Salado.

Bell emergency communications staff received the first call about the tornado at 5:37 p.m. Minutes later, about 20 others calls came in.

First responders immediately launched operations, the judge said.

"There were multiple agencies that responded to the initial calls, including multiple Bell County agencies, agencies from Williamson, McLennan County, Texas Department of Emergency Management, Texas Department of Transportation and others all responded to the calls," Blackburn said. "We also have assets in the air, helicopters assisting land assets right now to ensure that we have everyone accounted for along the path of the tornado."

Blackburn said the county is "very appreciative of that response" from multiple agencies.

## **Other area tornadoes**

The National Weather Service also recorded two other nearby tornadoes in Bell and Coryell counties.

A 150-yard-wide tornado, classified as an EF-Unknown, struck a remote and undeveloped part of Fort Hood at 5:06 p.m. in Coryell County and traveled for nearly four miles until 5:15 p.m., according to preliminary weather data.

"No known damage occurred," the agency said in a Twitter post.

An EF-0 tornado, also about 150 yards wide, struck the Seaton area east of Temple, the weather service confirmed. That tornado hit at 7:22 p.m. Tuesday and traveled about 3½ miles until 7:31 p.m.

"The tornado resulted in damage to trees consistent with maximum winds of 75 mph," the weather said on Twitter

NWS meteorologist Madison Gordon said the agency has teams at the tornado sites to find damage and determine the speed and size of the tornado activity. Those teams will look for certain indicators with debris to judge how fast a tornado was moving, she added.

"There are damage indicators that we see and the wind speeds are based off of the materials that were damaged and how they were damaged," Gordon said. "It depends if it was a metal shed or a wooden home that was damaged, those indicate different wind speeds."

## **Devastation**

Blackburn, the county's chief executive, said he witnessed "lots and lots of debris" as he toured some of the areas hit by the Salado tornado.

"The path of the tornado, which again extends several miles — there's not much left," he said. "Large trees uprooted, overturned, stripped. Buildings really reduced to rubble in many locations. Power lines, power poles scattered all over the place.

"It's pretty devastating."

Blackburn said weather alerts and information on television and online helped inform people about the tornado and urged them to immediately take cover. Those alerts probably helped save lives, he said.

"The damage, while significant, it certainly could have been worse," Blackburn said.

Coby Jackson, who lived in the area 26 years, agreed. He said he's never had such a close call with a tornado.

"The closest one was Jarrell in the '90s," Jackson said, referring to the May 27, 1997, F-5 tornado that killed 27 people. "I was a kid back then. I still can't believe it hit this close."

Shelbi Jackson echoed her husband's comments.

"You hear stories all the time and see pictures on the news," she said. "When you see it in real life, and it is (affecting) your neighbors, it makes it real."

## Cleanup

Blackburn said county officials were prepared to set up a shelter but there was no need by Tuesday night or Wednesday.

Bell County is prepared to assist property owners and others, the judge said.

"We'll continue to work with them in the days ahead for any further assistance they may need," he said.

Cleanup will take time, he added.

"There's going to be many, many, many days of cleanup to follow this," Blackburn said. "This is just the beginning of a long stretch."

*Telegram staff writers Shane Monaco and Christian Betancourt contributed to this report.*

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**Eric E. Garcia**

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