

[Rollcall Vote No. 27 Ex.]

YEAS—51

Banks	Graham	Moreno
Barrasso	Grassley	Mullin
Blackburn	Hagerty	Murkowski
Boozman	Hawley	Paul
Britt	Hoeben	Ricketts
Budd	Husted	Risch
Capito	Hyde-Smith	Rounds
Cassidy	Johnson	Schmitt
Collins	Justice	Scott (FL)
Cornyn	Kennedy	Scott (SC)
Cotton	Lankford	Sheehy
Cramer	Lee	Sullivan
Cruz	Lummis	Thune
Curtis	Marshall	Tillis
Daines	McCormick	Tuberville
Ernst	Moody	Wicker
Fischer	Moran	Young

NAYS—47

Alsobrooks	Hickenlooper	Rosen
Baldwin	Hirono	Sanders
Bennet	Kaine	Schatz
Blumenthal	Kelly	Schiff
Blunt Rochester	Kim	Schumer
Booker	King	Shaheen
Cantwell	Klobuchar	Slotkin
Coons	Lujan	Smith
Cortez Masto	Markey	Van Hollen
Duckworth	Merkley	Warner
Durbin	Murphy	Warnock
Fetterman	Murray	Warren
Galego	Ossoff	Welch
Gillibrand	Padilla	Whitehouse
Hassan	Peters	Wyden
Heinrich	Reed	

NOT VOTING—2

Crapo
McConnell

The PRESIDING OFFICER. On this vote, the yeas are 51, the nays are 47. The motion is agreed to.

EXECUTIVE CALENDAR

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will report the nomination.

The senior assistant legislative clerk read the nomination of Megan Blair Benton, of Missouri, to be United States District Judge for the Western District of Missouri.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Mississippi.

WINTER STORM FERN

Mr. WICKER. Mr. President, in a moment, my friend and fellow Senator CINDY HYDE-SMITH will join me in taking a few moments to highlight the damage done—the devastation done—by Winter Storm Fern, along with the resilience of our community and the citizens and leadership there.

Fern covered much of Mississippi with freezing rain, and then a week of low temperatures locked in a blanket of ice. Nearly 200,000 homes lost power, and road travel became almost impossible.

Temperatures are rising a bit now, but, tragically, there is still very much devastation. At this point, 26 Mississippians have lost their lives because of this winter storm, and that number, unfortunately, is rising every day.

I do want to commend, as Senator HYDE-SMITH will, the communities—the churches, the schools, the businesses, the donation centers, the neighbors using Facebook to coordinate food distribution and boost morale—and from all around the country coming to help. At this point, 80 percent of the affected homes now have their power restored.

I commend the local leaders, mayors, commissioners, and the response team from FEMA, many of whom we know personally. We are thankful for what they have done and for their resilience.

I have said this in past years. In Mississippi, our Federal delegation is in this for the long haul, just like we are with the tornadoes that occurred earlier. And we are grateful to the President and for our friends at FEMA for helping us recover.

Now, if I might, before I yield to my dear friend, I want to point out an article that was in the magazine *Garden & Gun*—published by *Garden & Gun*—some 2 days ago by Beth Ann Fennelly of Oxford, MS.

Beth Ann Fennelly, for 5 years, was our State's poet laureate. And she published this article in *Garden & Gun*, which says:

A beloved oak fell, and Oxford rose.

She could just as easily have said the entire State of Mississippi rose. But she talks about the experience that her family encountered, and you can multiply that times all of the households.

She says:

It was three a.m., and my husband and I and the youngest of our three children—the only one still living at home—huddled in a dark living room, jumping out of our skins with each new explosion, each crack of gunfire.

Except it wasn't explosives or gunpowder. It was our trees blowing their heads off and smashing to the earth or thudding to our roof.

She points out that we had learned during a severe ice storm some decades ago that:

... water freezing in trees expands them too rapidly. They explode from pressure, taking power lines with them. Some folks lost power for weeks.

It is the sound of gunfire. A very good article, very well-written by someone who would be poet laureate. And she ends bemoaning the tree, but observing and celebrating the spirit of Mississippi. And she says:

The ice will melt, and the people of Mississippi will roll up their sleeves and crank their chainsaws. The logs will be cleared. But an uncanny new light will compress the violently lopped canopies. On our corner, the picnic blanket of shade our oak had tossed down will go unfurled. The bewildered birds' questions will go unanswered. The squirrels will take new routes to work. The anthem of November will be forever altered without the north wind's scattershot of acorns on the roof.

Then she ends by asking:

Do trees have souls?
Maybe it's an unanswerable question—

She says—

Or maybe the answer has never been more obvious.

I ask unanimous consent, Mr. President, that this article by Beth Ann Fennelly be printed in the *RECORD* after my remarks.

There being no objection, the material was ordered to be printed in the *RECORD*, as follows:

[*Garden & Gun*, Feb. 2, 2026]

A BELOVED OAK FELL, AND OXFORD ROSE
WHAT HAPPENED WHEN "THUNDER ICE" CAME
TO MY HOME IN MISSISSIPPI
(By Beth Ann Fennelly)

It was three a.m., and my husband and I and the youngest of our three children—the only one still living at home—huddled in the dark living room, jumping out of our skins with each new explosion, each crack of gunfire.

Except it wasn't explosives or gunpowder. It was our trees blowing their heads off and smashing to the earth or thudding to our roof.

We'd been warned. We moved to Oxford, Mississippi, in 2001, but Oxonians who'd experienced the ice storm of 1994 told us how water freezing in trees expands them too rapidly. They explode from pressure, taking power lines with them. Some folks lost power for weeks.

Forecasters had predicted this ice storm to be even nastier. "Fern," an innocuous name straight out of *Charlotte's Web*, would be rife with "thunder ice," a name straight out of pro wrestling. Indeed, sleet had been falling for hours. We'd lost power and the house was rapidly cooling.

The explosion we heard next sounded like the earth being split open, followed by a shuddering impact that shook our house to its frame. In the eerie silence that followed, a flash illuminated the street—flames shooting from a sizzling powerline, an arcing shower of sparks—and for a moment our dark yard strobed into relief, though there was no relief in it, everything nightmarish, our window crisscrossed by massive tree limbs.

No! I cried. Not her.

Do trees have souls?

Permit me to describe her: A white oak, one hundred and fifty years old. A sproutling when Ulysses S. Grant was inaugurated. How wide? Wide enough that you'd need three hide-and-seekers to hug her. A generous crown one hundred feet up, a tower of grandeur on our otherwise-ordinary corner lot.

A tree like that doesn't belong to a property. It belongs to posterity, to history, to the neighborhood. It's not just that her shade reduced our air conditioning costs. It's that she shaded lemonade stands, pickup football games. All the munchkin hoodlums knew: Her acorns made the greatest sling-shot ammo.

And now, as the chilly sunrise glazed the ice-coated trees with diamonds, my husband and I fought our way to her, climbing over branches and ducking dangling broken limbs. Half of the white oak was standing. Half of her lay in shards, stretching from one end of our lot to the other. The pinprick air smelled like lumber.

Her undignified funeral was two days later. By that point, with night temperatures falling to single digits, we'd been sleeping in our parkas in a family scrum. Or trying to sleep—sometimes I lay awake counting the plumes of my youngest's exhalations, worrying about our middle child, a few miles away, as we hadn't gotten through to him on the phone. Branches and downed power lines trapped our U-shaped driveway on both ends: no escape. Then came a knock on the door. We'd heard storm-chasing tree services were starting to arrive, sniffing desperation. This was an outfit from Texas. They could free our cars, hack up the oak and the six other felled trees, all for just \$5,000. My husband and I met eyes, in the crescent between hats and scarves. Tommy took the flashlight to find the checkbook. It was flecked with paint chips, he'd tell me later, dislodged from the ceiling when trees had bounced on the roof.

"Sorry for your loss." People often say this to a mourner after a loved one dies. Now

they were writing it about the oak, as I'd posted a photo on social media. For the first time the expression didn't sound clichéd. "I've always loved that oak," wrote a neighbor. "She was a good friend," wrote another. Another quoted Silverstein's *The Giving Tree*. Someone suggested I take her heartwood to a carpenter to have furniture made. A great idea, but far too late; she was stacked like dozens of cords of firewood along the curb for some future when FEMA reared its head. By the time the tree service had arrived, we weren't thinking about milling porch rockers. We were hoping our batteries and candles would last. Maybe the rocker would have been a lovely memorialization. Or maybe it would have been like what John LeCarré said about seeing his novel turned into a movie—"like seeing your oxen turned into bouillon cubes."

It's day seven and counting of no power at our house, but as I write this we're warm and safe, a mile away. Retired colleagues who learned of our plight picked us up in their four-wheel-drive SUV, ensconced us in their guest room. We've been gobsmacked by the miracles of hot showers and coffee.

And kindness. Gobsmacked by kindness. One thing about a natural disaster: it pulls a community together. Mississippi is "the hospitality state." Evidence for that moniker has never been more apparent. The sometimes-snarky "What's Happening in Oxford?" Facebook page is churning with vulnerable requests met with acts of generosity. Someone's elderly grandfather needs firewood and food. Can anyone help? Yes, they could and did. Another poster offers to chainsaw free a family who lives ten miles out in the county. A family who scored a hotel room with hot water is offering showers to families without water. One of the few open restaurants is feeding first responders for free. A rental house of students is handing out coffee. It all makes me a little weepy, to tell the truth.

My middle child gets through on the phone, at last. He's a sophomore at Ole Miss, where my husband and I teach. He's living off campus with four friends and calling me from his car, where he's cradling his dead pet, a spotted gecko, holding it to the heater vents. Cold-blooded, reliant on an electric heating pad, poor Glizzy couldn't take the freeze. My son is despondent—allergic to cats and dogs, he's lavished years of affection on this stupid dead ten-inch reptile. But—thank you, thank you, thank you, God—"He blinked!" Thomas yells. "He blinked!"

We exhale shakily. My mind reaches vaguely for a lizard/Lazarus pun, but I'm too worn out to find it, and he's too worn out to laugh anyway.

He tells me a tree has fallen on his roommate's windshield, and they're trapped, but they can charge their cell phones in their cars. Texts are starting to get through. He's okay.

I tell him that we're okay, too. I don't tell him that ten Mississippians have died from the storm. I do tell him the university has cancelled classes for two weeks. And I tell him about the tree. Once upon a time, he'd hunted Easter eggs among its roots, parked his matchbox cars there.

He's silent for a while. "I can't wait for things to return to normal," he says.

They'll return, I want to tell him, but not to normal.

The ice will melt, and the people of Mississippi will roll up their sleeves and crank their chainsaws. The logs will be cleared. But an uncanny new light will compress the violently lopped canopies. On our corner, the picnic blanket of shade our oak had tossed down will go unfurled. The bewildered birds' questions will go unanswered. The squirrels will take new routes to work. The anthem of November will be forever altered without the

north wind's scattershot of acorns on the roof.

Do trees have souls?

Maybe it's an unanswerable question.

Or maybe the answer's never been more obvious.

Mr. WICKER. I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER (Mr. SHEEHY). The other distinguished Senator from Mississippi.

Mrs. HYDE-SMITH. Mr. President, I join my colleague Senator ROGER WICKER to draw the attention of the American people to the widespread devastation caused by Winter Storm Fern. This powerful storm has affected millions of Americans across the country, but its effects were especially severe in the South, a region not typically equipped to manage prolonged snow, ice, sleet, and dangerous winter conditions.

This storm was particularly devastating in Mississippi, a State that simply lacks the infrastructure and equipment necessary to respond to a storm of this magnitude. We are just not prepared, and certainly don't know how to drive on the roads during this time.

Tragically, Winter Storm Fern has claimed the lives of at least 26 Mississippians as of February 2. Each loss is heartbreaking and comes with so many stories, as Senator WICKER reflected upon.

The breadth and severity of this disaster have left swaths of the Delta and north Mississippi with landscapes littered with shattered trees and downed power lines. Line crews in this bitter cold from Mississippi and other States are making steady progress in restoring power to nearly 200,000 families and businesses that lost power. While we applaud that progress, it may still take another week to fully connect everyone, especially in more rural counties that lack resources. Long-term recovery, of course, will take much longer than that.

I am grateful for the strong response from our State and Federal partners. More than 600 Mississippi National Guard soldiers are on extended deployment after performing critical missions, including road clearance, refueling operations, distribution of goods, and conducting welfare checks.

The Mississippi Department of Wildlife, Fisheries, and Parks is assisting with welfare checks and emergency calls in Alcorn and Tippah Counties that were hit so hard.

Numerous State agencies are playing vital roles in the response, including the Mississippi Emergency Management Agency, Mississippi Department of Public Safety, the Mississippi Department of Transportation headed by Brad White, Mississippi State Department of Health, and Mississippi Forestry Commission. FEMA has also been on the ground, providing \$3.75 million in rapid emergency funding from generators to tree removal and other urgent needs.

I want to also recognize the extraordinary contributions of volunteer orga-

nizations—we certainly feel better when we see them pull up—including national groups like the Salvation Army, the American Red Cross, Samaritan's Purse, and Christ In Action, as well as countless local organizations whose help has been invaluable to our State.

These accolades cannot overshadow the resiliency and kindness of individual Mississippians who are simply looking out for each other to overcome yet another natural disaster.

Still, the work is far from finished. I, along with fellow members of the Mississippi congressional delegation, strongly support Governor Reeves' request for a major disaster declaration, and we encourage President Trump to approve it swiftly.

I ask my colleagues and the American people to keep the people of my State and everyone harmed by Winter Storm Fern in your prayers.

Mr. President, I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Texas—sorry, the Senator from Tennessee.

Mr. HAGERTY. I would note that Texas only exists because of Tennessee.

TENNESSEE

Mr. President, I rise today to acknowledge my home State Governor Bill Lee on his exceptionally well-received state of the State address this week, which I was honored to attend.

In Tennessee, we believe that parents know best for their children. We are committed to expanding school choice and education options for students to succeed, an effort Gov. Bill Lee has championed from the outset of his tenure as Governor.

Governor Lee started the Education Freedom Scholarship Program, and it is already in high demand among parents and students. This year the program received 54,000 applications so far for 20,000 slots. It is truly remarkable.

Under Governor Lee's leadership, Tennessee has gone from the bottom half of States in educational scores to a top-five State for gains in reading and in math. Students are thriving, and their future is only getting brighter.

As a former commissioner of the Tennessee Department of Economic and Community Development, I know firsthand what it means to bring new jobs and better opportunities for Tennesseans. Just last year, private companies invested more than \$11 billion in Tennessee. Business leaders are flocking to the Volunteer State because of the strategic advantages that we provide in nuclear energy, in low taxes, in skilled labor, and in our entrepreneurial spirit. Job creators are seeking the benefits of having a strong partner, not an adversary, in the Tennessee government.

Governor Lee and Republican leadership in the State have prioritized investment in nuclear energy; and because of that, Tennessee is the No. 1 State for nuclear energy development. Indeed, the Volunteer State is the global leader in nuclear energy, recruiting