

After the storm...Can Hicks Airfield property owners count on Rio Concho Aviation's Water Utility?

By Lois Kinman Flappings Editor

It was a week no Texan will forget.

Frigid cold temperatures that lasted for days leading to the catastrophic failure of the state's electricity grid. It left millions of us without power, some of us without heat, and some of us without water.

At Hicks Airfield, property owners were not spared. Electricity went off around 2 am Monday, February 15. For those who heat with electricity, it did not take long for indoor temperatures to drop into the 40's. The loss of electricity also shutdown the electric pump used by Rio Concho Aviation to pump water to property owners, including hangars that are also residences.

For the next six days, Rio Concho Aviation worked to bring the water utility online. Not an easy task in temperatures in the single digits. Residents understood these were unusual times. What residents did not understand was what they perceived as a lack of communication from Rio Concho Aviation about the status of the restoration efforts. There was no timeline outlining what was happening nor were there instructions about what property owners could do to make Rio Concho Aviation's job easier. There was also no communication between Rio Concho Aviation and Hicks Airfield Pilot's Association (HAPA) board members.

I contacted the Board about the need for better communication with property owners during critical times. Two board members suggested an in depth review of the recent water outage to help residents better understand what happened and what steps were taken by Rio Concho Aviation. A list of questions was sent to Barbie Brunson, owner of Rio Concho Aviation. We gave her a week to reply. On deadline day, Barbie Brunson was asked for her responses. She said *"The water utility has already put out the necessary information. Thank you."* (You will find the full list of question we sent at the end of this article).

The responses from Rio Concho Aviation available were those posted on the Hick's Airfield Forums.

Timeline

Monday 2/15/21 2 am Power goes out, water utility electric pump goes out.

Tuesday 2/16/21 Power and water still out.

Wednesday 2/17/21 Power restored in evening, water still out. Some residents receive a robocall from Rio Concho Aviation.

That afternoon, Barbie Brunson posted on the forum. This is the first written communication from Rio Concho Aviation about the status of the water utility, 59 hours after the water outage started.

“Hello all, this is not an official communication from Rio Concho Aviation, it is a courtesy message to relay some facts in addition to the automated voice message you have received. For the last two days we have had a crew working with generators and heaters to attempt to restore our water utility services on the field, but to no avail as the current weather conditions have stunted all efforts. They were only able to briefly restore water service in a few areas before the pipes refroze. Crews are on standby once power is restored and temperatures allow for the restoration of water services. An automated message has been sent to all of our water customers, informing them that once power and water is restored, a boil notice has been issued. Please boil your water for at least 1 minute before consumption. Rio Concho Aviation will issue another notice once our sample has been approved by the Health Department. We thank you for your patience and understanding.

It is unfortunate that Rio Concho Aviation requested a generator allotment in its 2016 rate increase application, but was denied due to protests from a few customers. Such a generator would have allowed us to keep power going to the wellhouse and would have kept the field supplied with water during this emergency.

Personally we have heard some customers accuse Rio Concho of "not caring about us". This is an egregious lie and is not backed by the reality that we have been doing everything we possibly can to restore water service to each of our customers, we make this statement to clarify any misinformation that has been spread. Stay safe and stay warm! -Rio Concho Aviation.”

Thursday 2/18/21 Water is on for approximately one hour but goes off again.

HAPA board President Steve Grace drove the airfield looking for water leaks at hangars, a job he said should have been done by Rio Concho Aviation.

“I drove the field today, turned off water at meters, several of which had water running out of the hangar door. Conferred with Barbie and had her contact the owner to relay what was done. Yes, we are a close community and do take care of each other as much as possible.” Grace also took calls from hangar owners, asking him to turn off the water at their property. He did and communicated that information to Rio Concho Aviation.

Friday 2/19/21 Water on for a short while then off again.

Saturday 2/20/21 Water back on by 7:30 pm for most property owners.

On Sunday, 2/21/21, Rio Concho Aviation issued a warning about turning off the curbstop (main water connection) which some people did while they made repairs to broken pipes.

“If Rio Concho Aviation, Inc. has turned your curbstop off due to ruptured pipes inside your hangar and those repairs have been made and you require

“We have been doing everything we possibly can to restore water service to each of our customers”

-RIO CONCHO AVIATION

water service back on, please contact ONLY Rio Concho Aviation, Inc. Water Utility at 817-233-1058 to turn your water service back on. We have repeatedly requested that you DO NOT TAMPER with the water utilities curbstop or meter. ONLY Authorized personnel are allowed to perform these functions. Thank you, Rio Concho Aviation, Inc.”

On Sunday 2/22/21, Rio Concho Aviation posted:

“In consulting with the Department of Homeland Security, Rio Concho Aviation has been advised to publish this notice outlining the penalty for several cases of Meter Tampering that have been discovered over the last week. Please be assured that Rio Concho Aviation will investigate these violations of Federal Law to the fullest extent possible.

*‘Tampering with a public water system is a **federal offense under Federal Statute, Title 42 United States Code 300i-1**, the maximum penalty is up to 20 years prison term, and a maximum fine up to \$1 million dollars. Tampering with a public water system is also a state offense under Texas Statute, Title 5 Texas Penal Code 22.07 Terroristic Threat (a)(4) and Title 7 Texas Penal Code 28.03 Criminal Mischief (a)(1), (2), and (3), the state maximum penalty is up to 10 years prison term, and a maximum fine up to \$10,000 dollars.’*

*If you need your water turned on or off, please contact Rio Concho Aviation, The Water Utility, to handle your issue. Any unauthorized tampering or alterations made to the water equipment by anyone other than Rio Concho personnel is **illegal**. Damages incurred to the water utility's equipment will be repaid at customer's expense.”*

On March 1, 2021, Rio Concho Aviation advised property owners the addition of a service valve would allow them to shut off their water supply:

“In the future if your hangar does not have a service valve other than the main curbstop, you are required by Texas law to have installed, a P2903.9.1 Service Valve. ‘Each dwelling unit shall be provided with an accessible main shutoff valve near the entrance of the water service. The valve shall be of a full-open type having nominal restriction to flow, with provision for drainage such as a bleed orifice or installation of a separate drain valve. Additionally, the water service shall be valved at the curb or lot line in accordance with local requirements.’ The water utility’s curbstops are not intended for regular use and excessive force can damage them causing rapid water loss. We want to thank all our customers for their patience while we worked through this weather anomaly.”

Generators

There were several posts on the Forum relating to why Rio Concho Aviation, which has been the water utility provider for decades, had not purchased a generator to power the well pump when the electricity goes out.

On Wednesday, 2/17/21, Barbie Brunson's post on the forum included a reference to a generator request: *"It is unfortunate that Rio Concho Aviation requested a generator allotment in its 2016 rate increase application, but was denied due to protests from a few customers. Such a generator would have allowed us to keep power going to the wellhouse and would have kept the field supplied with water during this emergency."*

That prompted this response by Jeff Sheets: *"As to the proposed generator, you've owned the water system since the mid-1990's is that correct? Why haven't you expensed a generator in the last 20+ years? Buy it, depreciate it annually, and put it in your annual expenses for a rate increase. The PUC will approve it as I'm sure you're aware. I don't recall reading that Rio Concho wanted a generator in your last rate increase as the PUC paperwork asks for known expenses and since you never purchased one, it wasn't a known expense. If you did request it, please provide the specific document filing number so I can re-read it. I have been told that at least one resident offered you a generator in the middle of the week but it was declined. I'm sure there was a good reason but I don't know what that might be."*

Resident Martin Bennett said Rio Concho Aviation has a moral obligation to do everything within its power to keep the water flowing. "We don't have an option to buy water from the city, the county, or any other vendor. Rio Concho provides us that service...I don't know how powerful their well pump is but I'm pretty sure that for less than \$20,000 they could put a back up generator on there, and for every time the power goes out, Hicks could have water, and it should have water for the price they charge."

Communication

Most Hicks property owners understand how extreme cold temperatures and power outages combined to take out the water utility. What is not understood by many is a perceived lack of communication from Rio Concho Aviation. Some property owners received robocalls from Rio Concho Aviation. But other property owners never heard anything from the utility. "I had zero communication about the status of the water from the provider," said resident Donley Lytle.

A March 1, 2021 posting on the Forum by Barbie Brunson included the following:

"To ensure that you receive our automated phone notifications, please verify your correct contact number with us. We would like to thank those of you that acknowledged receiving them." Some residents would like to see notifications by Rio Concho Aviation sent out by text, email and robocall, ensuring the information has a chance to be seen if one delivery system fails.

On March 1, two weeks after the start of the water first went out, Rio Concho Aviation posted on the Forum this recap of events:

"A note from Rio Concho Aviation Water Utility We hope everyone has recovered from the recent unprecedented winter storm and had minimal damage to your hangar."

In anticipation of the approaching winter storm and the impact it may have on our water system, we contacted our emergency water well service crew days ahead to secure a slot for restoration and repairs. We were extremely fortunate they could get to us on Monday when the airfield lost power. Some sixty other water utilities were not so fortunate in getting such prompt service and suffered far more damages with their operations than ours. After a weeklong process of emergency crews with generators working into the early morning hours to restore the water, temperatures finally allowed for the restoration of water service.

As the water purveyor of Hicks Airfield, we receive regular emergency text messages from Oncor of power outages to our wellhouse location, however we did not receive any notification in this instance due to the large geographical area that was Impacted. We have been in contact with Oncor on this matter.”

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Questions submitted to Rio Concho Aviation

Monday 2/15 approx. 2am Electricity goes out at Hicks. Water utility electric pump goes out at the same time. How did you find out the water was out? What did you do this first day? Was there any communication with Rio Concho customers this day, if so what was said and how was the information given (text, email, calls)?

Tuesday 2/16: What was the status of operations? What actions were taken at restoration? Any communications with customers?

Wed 2/17: What was the status of operations? What actions were taken at restoration? Any communications with customers? On this day you posted an update on the Forum that said in part: “Hello all, this is not an official communication from Rio Concho Aviation, it is a courtesy message to relay some facts in addition to the automated voice message you have received. For the last two days we have had a crew working with generators and heaters to attempt to restore our water utility services on the field, but to no avail as the current weather conditions have stunted all efforts. They were only able to briefly restore water service in a few areas before the pipes refroze. Crews are on standby once power is restored and temperatures allow for the restoration of water services.”

Was there any thought of sending this information out to customers by email or text instead of on the forum to ensure your customers received it?

Thursday 2/18: What was the status of operations? What actions were taken at restoration? Any communications with customers? I am told the water came on for less than 1 hour then went off again. What happened?

Friday 2/19: What was the status of operations? What actions were taken at restoration? Any communications with customers? Again, I was told the water came on for less than 1 hour again and then off. What happened?

Flappings Newsletter

Sat 2/20: What was the status of operations? What actions were taken at restoration? Any communications with customers? Again, I was told the water came on for less than 1 hour again and then off. What happened?

On 2/21, as part of BOIL NOTICE and RESTORING WATER SERVICE post you made, you said "If Rio Concho Aviation, Inc. has turned your curbstop off due to ruptured pipes inside your hangar and those repairs have been made and you require water service back on, please contact ONLY Rio Concho Aviation, Inc. Water Utility at 817-233-1058 to turn your water service back on."

How many hangers still need to make repairs and have their water turned off? (I will need to update this number on the day this is published).

Has a water sample been submitted? For my background, who do you submit this sample to and what is the purpose of the test? Is there a timeline on when you expect to hear back regarding this test?

Communication with Board members Did you communicate with members of the HAPA board about the water situation at any time between 2/15 to today? If so, who and what was communicated?

Communications with Customers What attempts were made to update customers on the status of the water? I know some robocalls were made, but some customers not receive any communication.

Many customers had no idea what was going on with the water situation. They wanted more frequent updates with specifics about what was being done, a timetable of what to expect. Why did this not happen? Are there any plans to notify customers of future water system outages and status by text or email? If not, why not?

Were any standby generators offered to Rio Concho to power their electric pump? If so, how many were offered? If offered, why weren't they used?

Why has Rio Concho not purchased a generator to power the water system when the electricity goes out? In the 2016 presentation to the PUC, which specific filing included the request for a generator? Can you provide a copy of that specific request?

On February 22, you posted the following on the forum: Public Water System protocol DHS In consulting with the Department of Homeland Security, Rio Concho Aviation has been advised to publish this notice outlining the penalty for several cases of Meter Tampering that have been discovered over the last week. Please be assured that Rio Concho Aviation will investigate these violations of Federal Law to the fullest extent possible. "Tampering with a public water system is a **federal offense under Federal Statute, Title 42 United States Code 300i-1**, the maximum penalty is up to 20 years prison term, and a maximum fine up to \$1 million dollars. Tampering with a public water system is also a state offense under Texas Statute, Title 5 Texas Penal Code 22.07 Terroristic Threat (a)(4) and Title 7 Texas Penal Code 28.03 Criminal Mischief (a)(1), (2), and (3), the state maximum penalty is up to 10 years prison term, and a maximum fine up to \$10,000 dollars." If you need your water turned on or off, please contact Rio Concho Aviation, The Water Utility, to handle your issue. Any unauthorized tampering or alterations made to the water equipment by anyone other than Rio Concho personnel is **illegal**. Damages incurred to the water utility's equipment will be repaid at customer's expense.

What kind of meter tampering occurred?

Several people who witnessed water running out of a hanger door turned the water off at the curbstop. They felt this was common sense thing for them to do to prevent further damage. Are you saying people need contact Rio Concho and wait for you or someone you designate, to come to the field and turn the water off?

Many turned the water off in an attempt to clear the pipes of water and keep any new water from entering during the extreme cold weather. So per your post on the forum, a hangar owner does not have the right to turn off their water at the curb stop in anticipation of a possible problems?

Is there any other information you would like to share with your customers that I have not asked about that you want to be sure they know?