A shortage of propane gas in the Midwest and Northeast United States is impacting millions of homes and businesses in rural areas beyond the reach of utilities.

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Transcript

Propane Shortage Takes Toll on Rural America

BRIAN WILLIAMS, anchor:
Another big winter storm is going to hit across a big part of the country, bringing bone-chilling temperatures from the Upper Midwest right on up through New England, and because this follows that bitter cold from the so-called polar vortex a while back earlier this month some states are worried about propane supplies for heating homes. That story tonight from NBC’s John Yang.

JOHN YANG, reporting:
For Jeff Dahl in Stacy, Minnesota, north of Minneapolis, it’s already been a rough winter. He has closed off rooms in his house to cut his gas use.

DAHL: We have a propane fireplace that we have just turned off.

YANG: But it’s still expensive.

DAHL: Last year we were paying about eight dollars a day to heat the house and this year we’re up about $15 a day.

YANG: With the polar vortex plunging so much of the nation into the deep freeze so early this year, there’s a shortage of propane gas in the Midwest and Northeast. In rural areas, beyond the reach of utilities, it’s used to heat about 7 million homes and businesses.

RICHARD ROLDAN (National Propane Gas Association): That early demand has made it very difficult for us to catch up.

YANG: Across the Midwest, propane prices have spiked, up as much as 46% over last winter, according to government data. Demand isn’t going to ease any time soon as another blast of arctic air heads south.

JANICE HUFF (Meteorologist): The polar vortex returns, at least a part of it will spread from the northern plains and Canada all the way across the Great Lakes, with more sub-freezing temperatures, subzero wind chills for the next couple of days.

YANG: Fifteen states from Oklahoma to Maine have emergency declarations in place, easing limits on how many hours propane truck drivers can be on the road. The Transportation Department has declared a home heating fuel emergency, relaxing regulations in 24 Midwest and Northeast states. Industry officials say they’re talking to regulators about further steps. But it could take a while. And in the meantime,
homeowners, like Jeff Dahl, are hit with a double whammy.

DAHL: We have just been watching our numbers to make sure we’re able to-- to keep heating the house to a comfortable level through the remainder of the winter.

YANG: With a lot more winter to come. John Yang, NBC News, South Holland, Illinois.