A state of emergency was declared in eleven states in response to Winter Storm Jonas, which slammed the East Coast last week, killing at least 37 people and leaving 250,000 people without power, according to the Weather Channel. In addition, the storm could end up causing “multi-billion” dollar economic losses, reinsurance broker Aon Benfield told Fortune on Monday.

“Given the physical damage to homes, businesses and other structures and automobiles, plus the high costs incurred due to business interruption, it is expected that this will end up being a multi-billion-dollar economic cost,” said Benfield.

Several governors declared a state of emergency even before the storm hit.

**What does it mean when a governor declares a state of emergency?**
The effect of declaring a state of emergency varies from state to state.

“All governors have the authority to declare a state of emergency and each state has its own parameters for doing so,” said Beverly Bell, Policy and Program Manager for the National Emergency Management Association. “Generally, the specifics for declaring a state of emergency and what that triggers are set out in state law.”

According to Bell, in all fifty states a declaration allows a governor to access disaster resources and funding that might not be available otherwise. In addition, a state of emergency can authorize agencies to respond as needed, streamline communication among agencies, free up the necessary resources to handle an emergency, and prompt a number of legal and operational changes that can affect the government, private organizations and the public.

For example, in New Jersey, the Governor declares a state of emergency when “he/she believes a disaster has occurred or may be imminent that is severe enough to require State aid to supplement local resources in preventing or alleviating damages, loss, hardship or suffering,” according to the NJ Office of Emergency Management [4]. “This declaration authorizes the Governor to speed State agency assistance to communities in need. It enables him to make resources immediately available to rescue, evacuate, shelter, provide essential commodities (i.e., heating fuel, food, etc.) and quell disturbances in affected localities. It may also position the State to seek federal assistance when the scope of the event exceeds the State's resources.”

In a press release [5], Kentucky Gov. Matt Bevin explained why a pre-emptive emergency declaration for this storm was important. “My primary concern is safety. By declaring a state emergency we are giving emergency management the options they need to proactively respond to local needs,” said Bevin.
Michael Dossett, Director of Kentucky Emergency Management, elaborated on Bevin's statement, saying: “By virtue of the executive order for a state of emergency, allied state agencies are now able to leverage resources that are beyond local government capabilities.”

Managing the emergency

Once an emergency has been declared, state emergency management agencies often take the lead on coordinating a state's response.

“State emergency management serves as the coordination point during an event. And while we typically think of them only when a disaster hits, they do a lot of the legwork ahead of time – holding drills and exercises, conducting outreach and education, and making sure plans are complete and current,” said Bell.

In Pennsylvania, Emergency Management Agency Director Rick Flinn explained to Fox 43 [6] how state emergency management officials work to allocate resources appropriately when a state of emergency is declared: “We look at a county, work with that county emergency management agency. If there is a guard resource needed, they'll work with them. That will come up to the state EOC [Emergency Operations Center] and we'll have a mission to assign them to do what they need to do”.

In the state of Tennessee, The Tennessee Emergency Management Agency lists five state emergency “Activation Levels” on its website [7], ranging from a Level 5, or “Normal Operations” under which “no state declaration of emergency exists,” all the way to a Level 1 – or a “Catastrophic Disaster” – which is characterized by a disaster of “great magnitude” during which “deaths will probably have occurred or the potential is very high”.

The Tennessee Emergency Management Agency reported [8] that the state declared a Level III emergency for this winter storm on Thursday, Jan. 21, 2016, prior to the storm's arrival.