

Record flooding forces thousands to evacuate in central US

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Over the past week, heavy rainfall in parts of Kansas, Oklahoma, Texas and Missouri has led to record floods, killing several people and forcing thousands to flee their homes.

On Thursday, storms along the Oklahoma-Texas border were expected to cause dams to overflow. Heavy rains have been inundating Texas since May 23, and have been blamed for at least 11 deaths. The Trinity River near Dallas has reached a height of 37 feet—7 feet above flood stage.

State officials said on Thursday that 1,000 homes have been severely damaged or destroyed, with more likely in the coming days. Jack Colley, chief of the Texas Division of Emergency Management, said the flooding was an “unprecedented rain event in Texas for this time of year” and the most severe since 1957.

Heavy rainfall fell across a wide swath of southeastern Kansas into west-central Missouri through July 1. While water levels have now begun to subside, the region is still in danger of a new round of flooding in the event of more heavy rainfall.

The heaviest rains were concentrated in an area from just southeast of Wichita, Kansas to southeast of Kansas City, Missouri. This is a largely rural, agricultural region containing numerous small and medium-sized towns.

First hit with major flooding was Osawatomie, Kansas, located about 50 miles southwest of Kansas City. After 10 to 12 inches of rain fell within a week, 2,000 of the town’s 4,600 residents were ordered to evacuate early Sunday morning, as it became clear that two major streams converging near the town were likely to breach their protective levees.

Most of the families in the area are poor and without flood insurance, and hundreds of homes have been severely damaged. Marsha Adams, who sells insurance

in Osawatomie, told the *Osawatomie Graphic*, “The hardest thing to have to do [is] to tell these people who are devastated. Most people, probably 99 percent, don’t have flood insurance.”

The water level was reported to be the highest since the floods of 1951. Those floods, which killed 24 people and displaced thousands in eastern Kansas, led to the construction of flood control reservoirs and levees in the region, but these have not been sufficient to prevent a new round of massive flooding more than 50 years later.

Meanwhile, in Coffeyville, Kansas (population 11,000), located just north of the Oklahoma border, about a quarter of the town’s homes were reported to be underwater earlier this week as the Verdigris river that flows through town reached record high levels. Adding greatly to the disaster, an oil refinery located in Coffeyville dumped tens of thousands of gallons of crude oil into the floodwaters. According to newspaper reports, a “malfunction” occurred while the staff was in the process of shutting down the facility on Sunday.

In an article on the front page of its business section on Wednesday July 4, the *Kansas City Star* reported that “a slimy layer of black gunk” had coated much of the flooded area, including homes, business and farmlands. High carbon dioxide levels were reported in at least one flooded, oil-contaminated home, preventing entry by fire officials.

Just downstream, officials in nearby Tulsa, Oklahoma, were watching closely as the oil spill reached the upper portion of Oologah Lake, which supplies about half of that city’s water supply. On Thursday, reports suggested that the spill would not affect Tulsa’s water supply significantly, but its broader environmental significance is still unclear.

The *Wichita Eagle* reported Wednesday that federal

and state officials considered it too early to judge the impact of the oil spill on the Coffeyville, Kansas area. However, an official with the EPA in Kansas City, Kansas, was quoted as saying of the oil spill, “Honestly, it’s pretty large. It’s pretty ugly.”

Oil analysts quoted in Wednesday’s *Kansas City Star* stated that the Coffeyville Resources Refinery is not expected to resume production for the rest of the summer. This outage of just one percent of the nation’s refining capacity has already resulted in local wholesale gasoline price increases of 20 to 25 cents a gallon. The refinery outage was expected to especially affect gasoline prices in Oklahoma, Kansas, Nebraska, South Dakota, North Dakota and Minnesota—all states that have recently seen some drop in prices. Prices in the region are now expected to stay up near three dollars a gallon for the rest of the summer.

Refinery officials said on Tuesday that they would not know the extent of the damage to the plant until workers could get in and do a thorough assessment—something still impossible while the entire facility remained under two to six feet of water, in the aftermath of the record-level floods.

While media attention focused on the heavy rainfall, evacuations, the oil spill in the Coffeyville area and the regional economic impacts of the refinery shutdown, there was little or no focus on exactly why the spill occurred or why plant officials waited until nearly the peak of the flood waters on Sunday before attempting to secure the facility, despite flood warnings that were issued in previous days.

Specifically, the National Weather Service had issued official flood warnings for much of southeast Kansas by midday on Friday, including Montgomery County where Coffeyville is located. By midnight Friday night, forecasts of minor to moderate flooding were issued for the Verdigris River in Coffeyville. By 9:30 am Saturday, the warning was upgraded to flooding of “major severity” as the river approached record high levels.

By late Saturday night, the river exceeded its flood of record with a level 8.75 feet above flood stage. The river then crested Sunday at 30 feet— 12 feet above flood stage—the same day that it was reported that the malfunction at the plant occurred as staff undertook operations to shut down production at the facility.

Though it was initially reported that the Coffeyville

Resources Refinery dumped 42,000 gallons of crude into the floodwaters, by Tuesday there were reports that this number might be unreliable. Concerns mounted that a more significant contamination of the area might have occurred.

In Oklahoma, serious flooding and evacuations occurred in the town of Miami, along the Neosho River in the far northeast of the state, as well as in the Bartlesville area located north of Tulsa. About 750 people have been displaced in the Miami area alone, with thousands of others affected in Bartlesville. Rain has fallen in Oklahoma City for 20 straight days.

While the water was slowly receding in many areas on Tuesday, it continued to rise in and around Miami. Local officials were bracing for the second-highest level of the Neosho River ever recorded.

“We have two children and have lost our home to the flood,” said a tearful Natasha Maxon, one of several Miami residents who met with Oklahoma Governor Brad Henry while he was touring the area, reported the *Tulsa World*.

“I don’t have no flood insurance,” Denia Payton, a resident of Miami told the Associated Press. “Whatever’s left here is gone.”



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