

Widespread flooding hits the US Midwest

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Torrential rains have triggered flash flooding throughout the US Midwest and central states, causing at least 13 deaths in the region. At this writing, several more people are missing, hundreds are sleeping in makeshift evacuation shelters, and thousands of homes have been flooded.

Thousands of travelers were stranded at airports after hundreds of planes were grounded. Breached levees and power outages have crippled many communities.

The developments are unfortunately familiar. Severe weather events associated with climate change have struck Missouri, Illinois, Kentucky, Indiana, and Ohio repeatedly in the past year. The impact of the flooding, anticipated to break historic records in many areas, has been augmented by the decayed state of public infrastructure and lack of local resources.

For example, Findlay, Ohio, the site of catastrophic flooding in August, once again faces inundation by the Blanchard River, which has exceeded its 11-foot flood level for the tenth time in just over a year.

Southeast Missouri and southern Illinois received nearly a foot of rain in less than two days. Because the ground is already saturated from a series of damaging ice storms and unprecedented precipitation, water has overwhelmed natural and manmade drainage mechanisms. Even miles from riverbanks, wide swaths of cropland are under water that laps at the edges of highways. Where water has receded, this reporter found roads covered in mud and debris, and in some areas literally breaking apart.

Although the storm system has passed, the National Weather Service has warned that flooding will expand until as late as Tuesday. The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration has warned that more than 250 towns and cities across a dozen states face floods.

Along the Mississippi and Ohio Rivers, as well as along other tributary rivers in the region, townspeople have had to hastily fortify levees, using stones, loose

gravel, and bags filled with mud. Some small river towns, facing the possibility of 10- to 20-foot surges by Sunday as water makes its way downstream, have begun evacuating nursing homes and hospitals.

On Wednesday night, 70 Missouri counties plus the city of St. Louis were declared “major disaster areas” and authorized to receive federal assistance. As of this writing, federal agencies have not issued specific guarantees for aid or begun recovery operations beyond pledging to deliver bottled water to the Missouri city of Piedmont.

The Associated Press quoted Doug LeComte, meteorologist at the federal Climate Prediction Center as saying that the level of moisture is “unprecedented for this time of year over an area that extends over 1,000 miles.” He said that the La Nina weather pattern often leads to increased precipitation, but “what’s happened in the last few months has not been a typical La Nina, the jet stream’s been on steroids.”

The past several years have seen a rapid erosion of the economy and living standards of Midwesterners. Jobs have been ruthlessly cut and industry gutted, leaving working families with low wages and towns impoverished. When disaster strikes, thousands of families have no back-up plan or insurance coverage.

Compounding this, many National Guard units from the Midwest that could be providing essential manpower in levee fortification efforts are instead occupying Iraq and Afghanistan. Local rescue teams are overwhelmed, underequipped, increasingly dependent on volunteers and donations, and frequently among the victims in disaster areas.

At all levels of government, years of tax cuts and business incentives have diverted funding for basic upkeep of roads, sewage systems, and emergency management into the coffers of the rich. Now, facing the distinct possibility of an economic depression, state and local governments have no means of instituting

public works programs, emergency reconstruction efforts, or even simple road and sewer upkeep.

According to the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, 22 states have a collective budget shortfall of at least \$37 billion, and the National Governors Association estimates that at least a dozen other state governments may similarly face shortfalls next year. The shortfall is similar to the levels faced going into the 2001 recession, but the deterioration of public infrastructure has advanced markedly since that time.

When budgets have come up short over the past few years, social infrastructure funding has consistently been among the first areas cut. According to the American Society of Civil Engineers, at least \$1.6 trillion is needed to fix outstanding problems in the country's critical infrastructure—roads, dams, sewers, and bridges. This is without taking into account future population growth, let alone complications and dangers posed by climate change.

Many state and local governments have already carved up and sold off public infrastructure, including roadways, water and sewage systems. In the hands of private entities with no interest but profit, infrastructure is left to crumble.



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