

US: Heavy flood damage as rivers rise in upper Midwest

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Powerful storms pounded the upper Midwest US again Friday, continuing the heavy rains that have already led to record flooding in some areas. Rising waters have overwhelmed dams and levees, blocking roads and forcing evacuations. Tornadoes accompanying the storms have killed at least six people, including four Boy Scouts in Iowa who died when a twister hit their encampment.

Eastern Iowa has been hardest hit by the flooding. In Cedar Rapids floodwaters inundated more than 400 downtown city blocks and forced the evacuation of a hospital. More than 8,000 residents have been evacuated from their homes and there is danger of a water shortage, with only one of the city's six wells still operating.

Nine rivers in Iowa are at or above record levels, and floodwaters have closed or washed out hundreds of highways, roads and bridges. The governor declared 83 of Iowa's 99 counties state disaster areas, and emergency shelters are operating in at least 12 locations. Tens of thousands across the state remain without power because of floodwaters and heavy storms.

In Des Moines officials issued a voluntary evacuation order for downtown as members of the National Guard and volunteers worked to shore up a levee along the Des Moines River that showed signs of weakening. Over 2,500 National Guard troops are operating around the state. Officials warn that waters may overtop the levee.

Four were killed and 40 more injured when a tornado hit a Boy Scout camp in western Iowa Wednesday. There were 93 campers and 25 staff members at the Little Sioux Scott Ranch about 40 miles north of Omaha, Nebraska. One witness said the tornado, one of 28 that day, totally destroyed the camp.

Heavy rains and flooding have also hit other Midwestern states, including Wisconsin, Missouri, Indiana, Illinois, Kansas, Minnesota and Michigan. On June 8, President Bush declared 29 counties in Indiana disaster areas.

Near Grand Rapids, Michigan police recovered the body of a motorist from a rain swollen river. In southern Minnesota a man died after his car plunged from a washed-out road into floodwaters.

In northern Missouri communities are preparing for a rise in the Missouri River, which is expected to crest over the weekend. A significant rise in the upper Mississippi River is expected by Wednesday, with predictions of the worst flooding in 15 years on the Mississippi north of St. Louis.

Meanwhile, corn, soybean and grain prices reached record levels as speculators bet that crop yields would come in substantially lower this year due to flooding. Corn prices are up 25 percent this month, reaching \$7.69 a bushel on the Chicago Board of Trade. "There are literally lakes in a lot of fields," said a field agronomist at Iowa State University's extension office in Muscatine, Iowa, quoted by the *Bloomberg News*. He said it was unlikely farmers could plant before June 25. Iowa is the top corn- and soybean-producing state.

There are predictions that the impact of the flooding will lead to even higher food and fuel prices. The storms have not only delayed the planting of crops, but caused the US Army Corps of Engineers to order the closure of a 200-mile stretch of the Mississippi River to barge traffic, after rising water threatened locks and dams. The river serves as a conduit for many agricultural and cargo ships. The closure will last at least two weeks, halting shipments of food, fuel and fertilizer.

The flooding in the Midwest is the worst since 1993

and reveals that little has been done in the meantime to upgrade levees and other critical infrastructure, despite warnings. Since the heavy rains began last week dams and levees have failed in numerous locations, leading to widespread property damage.

In Wisconsin a dam on Lake Delton failed Monday, closing a highway and sweeping away several homes. The force of the water was so great that it created a new channel in the Wisconsin River. Several other dams in the state are reported to be seeping or in danger of failing.

In Anamosa, Iowa a levee break destroyed a sewage treatment plant, sending contaminated water into surrounding neighborhoods. Levee breaks in Indiana and Illinois caused flooding in several small communities and led to the inundation of more than 50 square miles of farmland.

A report in the June 12 edition of the *Detroit Free Press*, titled, “Midwest floods expose aging, weak protection,” said the series of dam and levee failures leave “questions about whether the region is able to handle such a disaster.”

It warned: “Experts say the increasing frequency of severe storms and flooding is undermining the integrity of aging levees, bridges and dams.”

The long-term neglect of critical infrastructure has been compounded by the impact of unplanned and chaotic development. As a report on the Midwest flooding in the June 12 edition of the *Wall Street Journal* notes, “Large swaths of farm and forest land that had been soaking up excess water are now covered with concrete and asphalt for neighborhoods, shopping centers and parking lots, increasing water runoff into waterways. And local governments hungry for property-tax revenue have continued to allow construction in floodplains, according to a federally sponsored evaluation of the national flood Insurance Program published in 2006.”

There are no estimates yet for the amount of property damage caused by the floods, but if rains continue it could exceed the \$20 billion cost of the 1993 Midwest floods. If the storms continue, water levels on the Mississippi River may rise above the marks set in 1993. In many parts of the Midwest rainfall is well above average for the season, more than double in some areas.

The flooding will have huge consequences for the lives of ordinary people, whose homes, farms, small

businesses and personal property are destroyed. While not responsible for the decades of poor planning and neglect of dams and levees that have compounded this tragedy, they will bear the brunt of the cost.

Many Cedar Rapids homeowners affected by the floods lack flood insurance because they live in areas deemed “500 year flood plains” where the banks do not require it. Further, many do not realize that standard policies do not cover floods. Thus homeowners will be left holding mortgages but no money to rebuild.

The situation is no better in other areas. Fifty communities in Wisconsin dropped out of the federally-sponsored flood insurance program, making residents ineligible for state or federal aid. Overall, only a tiny proportion of residents in most states have flood insurance.



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