

Arkansas flash flood claims lives of 20 campers

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A flash flood along the Little Missouri River, near Langley, Arkansas, swept through a popular campground early last Friday morning, killing 20 campers. On Monday morning, search and rescue teams found the body of a victim believed to be the last person missing.

The victims had been camping in the Albert Pike Recreation Area, a campground that sits alongside the Little Missouri River and is part of the Ouachita National Forest in Arkansas.

The flash flood was caused by heavy rains that caused the river to rise from its normal depth of 3 feet to nearly 24 feet in just three hours, drowning campers, carrying away tents and overturning RVs.

The campground was full, with vacationing families occupying 54 campsites. In addition to the 20 people killed, 60 other people were rescued, two dozen of whom needed hospitalization. Seven of those killed were young children.

The flood was fuelled by a slow moving storm that dumped heavy rain onto the area. The storm stalled in the early morning hours, and water rolling down the hills began to overflow the normally quiet river. At 2 a.m. a gauge at nearby Langley showed the Little Missouri River was less than 4 feet; but near the campground water began rising at nearly 8 feet per hour.

The power of the water was such that it peeled asphalt off roads and bark off trees. Piles of trees and other debris were as tall as 30 feet, with one measuring some 150 feet long, 15 feet tall and 30 feet wide. One victim's body was found 8 miles from the campsite.

While much of the media has centered on the human cost of this tragedy, there has been little explanation of why no warning was given to the campers. The National Weather Service issued its first warnings

Thursday evening as a steady rain that began around 4:30 p.m. began to saturate the ground, but there was no emergency notification.

At 2:00 a.m. Friday morning, the National Weather Service issued a further warning as it tracked the storm stalling over a mountainous area with runoff into the Little Missouri River.

The *New York Times* reported that an official in "Mr. Obama's cabinet said that the local authorities did what they could to warn campers of the flood, but vowed to review procedures." The *Times* did not identify the government official.

The National Forest Service does not have a ranger on duty in the campground, and there are no warning sirens. For many years now both the National Park Services and US Forest Service have used volunteers to staff campgrounds. It is not clear if the volunteer staying at the Albert Pike campground was ever informed of the weather service's warnings. The volunteer had to escape the raging river himself, and he was not equipped with even a megaphone or air horn to wake the others.

It also appears that the Arkansas State Police, if they were indeed notified, did not make any attempt to warn the campers. One state trooper did notice high waters around 3 a.m. and reportedly told the sheriff's office, but there was no indication that either police agency attempted to warn the campers, or had a means of doing so.

At 2:00 a.m. that morning, a monitor on the river near the campground location still registered the water level at only 4 feet. Had campers been ordered to leave at this point, they still could have driven their cars to safety before the low-lying bridges were immersed. Even if the warning had come later, and the campers were not able to drive out, they still likely would have

had enough time to climb the steep banks and escape the water's path.

The National Forest Service, which runs the Ouachita National Forest, has been targeted for repeated budget cuts. At the same time, increased expenses for firefighting have led to further reductions in other areas of the forest service's budget. In addition, political pressure on the agency has steadily shifted its mission from preserving the forests and providing support for vacationers, to one making it easier for logging companies, as well as gas and oil drillers, to have access to the natural resources located in the national forests. This has meant less attention to developing emergency warning and evacuation procedures.

Global warming has also contributed to increased flooding. While it is impossible to conclude that any one storm is the result of rising global temperatures, climate scientists warn that as temperatures increase, the atmosphere can hold more water, leading to more severe storms. Leading climate scientist Dr. James Hansen commented, "The increased water vapor in the air (and it increases rapidly with increased temperature) not only yields heavier rainfall events—it also provides fuel for stronger storms driven by latent heat, including thunderstorms, tornadoes and tropical storms—so the strongest storms will be stronger."



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