

Alabama residents struggle in storm's aftermath

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Nine days after a record-breaking storm devastated a swath of the American Deep South, thousands of homeless residents dig through rubble and await federal emergency funds. The recovery efforts, undertaken largely by local emergency responders, residents, and volunteers, have been hampered by days of rain and unseasonably cold temperatures.

The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) said that as of May 4, some 30,000 people have registered for housing assistance across the South. In contrast, only 800 residents in the region are staying in shelters. This is down by 300 from the weekend. Many residents are living in their damaged homes, sleeping in tents or under tarps. Others are doubled up with relatives, or burning through their savings staying in motels.

The April 27 tornadoes left 328 people dead in six states, with 236 killed in Alabama. The storm was the deadliest of its kind since 1936.

Previous death toll estimates ranged near 350, with some 250 in Alabama. These figures were revised downward as Alabama officials began to systematize the mortality count, eliminating some deaths that had been reported more than once. The list of missing persons has also been substantially reduced over the past few days; however, many residents remain unaccounted for.

In the city of Tuscaloosa, where 45 died and 1,000 were injured, 25 residents are still missing. A mile-wide tornado tore directly through residential neighborhoods in the city last Wednesday, destroying thousands of homes, businesses, and the city's emergency response center. In the immediate aftermath of the storm, 1,084 residents were missing. Residents spent days digging survivors out of collapsed apartment buildings.

Most of the missing are described by city officials as those who were not in regular contact with others. Homeless, elderly, and mentally ill residents would more likely have been exposed to the severe weather and without access to shelter. As of May 5, Tuscaloosa police were directing rescue crews in 16-hour shifts to locate missing persons and search rubble with cadaver dogs. Some of the search is focused on the forests and rural outlying areas around Tuscaloosa, where the powerful storm may have transported and flung bodies.

Tuscaloosa Mayor Walter Maddox said Wednesday that the city could confront a homeless population in the thousands and a years-long recovery process. "The rough math that I've done, I believe you're probably talking about thousands," he said. "If you've had 5,000 structures obliterated, I don't see how you don't have that number." The city does not have enough shelter housing or hotel space to accommodate displaced storm survivors, or workers who have come to the city for cleanup jobs.

On Thursday, FEMA announced it would "soon" bring in temporary trailers for storm victims in areas where rental housing is not available. The agency gave no time frame on the operation or number of units it would deliver. The prospect of flimsy, unsafe trailers like those brought in for Hurricane Katrina survivors in 2005 is far from popular among residents who want to rebuild. The units portend a stagnant "recovery" period for those who lost everything in the storms, and pose the risk of exposing occupants to yet more tornadoes during the peak storm season still ahead.

In the meantime, FEMA officials have stressed that residents must apply for rental assistance and emergency home repair grants, along with loans from the US Small Business Administration to cover rent while they wait on their grant applications. "People just need to apply for the assistance so FEMA can provide any assistance that might be available," Alabama Emergency Management Agency spokeswoman Yasamie August told the *Alabama Times Daily*.

Across the region, the April storms and this week's flooding along the Mississippi have prompted mounting disaster declarations. The Obama administration has sought to differentiate its response from the Bush administration's handling of Katrina, yet at every stage has asserted the leading role of private business interests in rebuilding and offloaded the bulk of recovery onto frayed local and state authorities, myriad religious and volunteer groups, and a few thousand National Guard soldiers.

President Obama made only one stop in Alabama, where he briefly toured Tuscaloosa on April 29, family in tow, before heading to Florida on a previously scheduled trip. "I've never seen devastation like this," he declared at a press conference in the city, where he pledged federal assistance. Slow

disbursement of basic aid has shown that the disaster is considered little more than a photo-op for the White House. In the past year, the administration responded in similar form to the Gulf oil disaster and the catastrophic flooding of Nashville, Tennessee, and the mid-South.

The tornado disaster has compounded an already bleak economic situation in the region. Tens of thousands of homes have been destroyed; electric, roadways, water, and other infrastructure have been damaged; and key industries have been crippled. Even in unaffected areas of Alabama, thousands of people were unable to report to work because of the shutdown of nuclear power plants and electrical grid damage that left more than a million addresses without electricity.

The economic toll of the disaster will take some time to calculate. Private disaster risk modeler EQUCAT forecasts a cost of \$2 to \$5 billion through the Deep South, mainly for residential damage. Birmingham-based Oakworth Capital Bank estimates that insurance claims in the state could top \$1 billion.

“It’s going to have a significant negative impact on Alabama for the near future,” Samford University economics professor Jennings Marshall commented to the *Birmingham News* Tuesday. “Lots of businesses were wiped out, both in Tuscaloosa, one of Alabama’s largest cities, as well as parts of Birmingham and in smaller communities across the state. That means no sales tax and income tax from businesses affected as well as people who lost jobs.”

The plunge in tax revenue will likely reverberate through public education, health care, and other state-funded programs that have already been cut to the bone.

Alabama is the third largest poultry producer in the US; the tornadoes demolished 200 poultry houses and severely damaged 180 more in the northern part of the state. Officials estimate that a quarter of the state’s poultry industry was wiped out in the disaster, and the Alabama Poultry and Egg Association has said that 5 million chickens were killed.

In rural areas, such agricultural concerns and manufacturing facilities constitute the primary employers for the population. Several auto and parts manufacturing plants run by Toyota and Mercedes-Benz have been either damaged or idled due to lack of electricity over the past week. Production in Alabama auto plants was already lower in the past two months due to the Japanese tsunami, prompting economists to lower the state’s gross domestic product figures by 0.5 percent, to 3 percent in 2011.

In Hackleburg, population 1,500, a tornado destroyed a large Wrangler Jeans distribution center that was the major employer in the area. “That one industry is the town,” Alabama Development Office director Seth Hammett told the Associated Press May 4. “Until they get back up and going again, that town will not be the same.” Officials said 30 of the town’s 31 businesses were demolished.

Hackleburg suffered catastrophic damage, including at least 24 deaths, from an EF5 tornado, the strongest category of

tornado, with winds in excess of 200 miles per hour. The impact was such that the Red Cross declared the city 75 percent destroyed.

Suffering a similar fate was Smithville, Mississippi, a town of 800 that lost 17 residents to another EF5 tornado. There, three Townhouse Home Furnishings facilities were heavily damaged. The company’s CFO, Tony Watson, has announced it will relocate its operations about 30 minutes away, commenting, “We’re trying to keep our people working so they can get a paycheck. It could be six months or a year before we reopen in Smithville and they have to keep up with orders or we’ll lose out accounts.” The town was so damaged by the tornado that its entire population was evacuated in the aftermath, and 17 residents still have not been found.

Jefferson County, Alabama’s most populous county, was already facing the possibility of declaring the largest municipal bankruptcy in US history. According to County Commission President David Carrington, the county has a far larger debt burden than was previously publicized, including a \$3.2 billion sewer bond debt.

At least 19 people died in Jefferson County, and 3,000 homes and 5,700 structures were declared a total loss to the disaster. “As it looks now,” Carrington told Reuters Tuesday, “the county is going to take a material financial hit for the next 3-5 years while we rebuild.” The projected cost of debris removal alone stands at \$400 million, of which the county is likely responsible for 15 percent if FEMA handles the cleanup.

In a statement before a joint session of the legislature Tuesday, Governor Robert Bentley said that FEMA was paying only a portion of debris-removal costs regardless of whether municipalities could afford the remainder. For local governments unable to pay, Bentley said the state would pay the local share for 30 days. Local officials have pointed out that the FEMA debris removal contracts do not allow workers on private property to help clear away rubble; instead, crews are to remove debris left in the right-of-way along the sides of roads.



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