

Mississippi flood spreads across Louisiana

Naomi Spencer
18 May 2011

Floodwaters from the Mississippi River continue to rush into central Louisiana, submerging small towns and farmland. On Monday night, the US Army Corps of Engineers opened two additional bays on the Morganza Floodway, directing part of the flood away from urban centers and into a 3,000-mile area between the Mississippi and Atchafalaya rivers.

As of Tuesday, 15 of the Morganza spillway's 125 gates had been raised. The spillway is currently diverting 102,000 cubic feet of water per second off the river, a flow rate greater than Niagara Falls. Officials have indicated that the Army Corps will open more bays as the river's crest moves south. By Saturday, the river is projected to rise to record levels in Vicksburg and Natchez, Mississippi; the waters will crest at Morganza in a week.

Tens of thousands of residents of the area face flooding, including at least 2,500 who will lose everything they own. Those who will be hardest hit are among the poorest in the country, who have made their livelihoods on farming and fishing, and whose homes line the region's waterways outside of municipal floodwalls.

For those without flood insurance, the Federal Emergency Management Agency has offered no compensation or aid. Governor Bobby Jindal has not requested FEMA assistance for recovery aid. The *New York Times* commented Tuesday, "If the governor believes the state cannot take care of the long-term needs of residents whose homes and businesses are damaged, he can ask for a major disaster declaration. But that step has not been taken, and there are no assurances that President Obama would grant such a request."

The Morganza gates will remain open for three weeks, meaning that floodwater up to 25 feet high will stand in the bayou region for an extended period of time before receding. Residents, who have been told by

authorities in some towns that they must evacuate with the expectation that they will never be able to rebuild, are struggling to pack their belongings with no financial means to relocate elsewhere.

The town of Butte La Rose is among the first to be flooded from the Morganza diversion. Residents were under a mandatory evacuation order Monday. Lower-lying neighborhoods expect to be inundated with at least 15 feet of water.

"All that work," one resident commented to WGNO television reporters. "We pretty much know our house will be underwater, so we're trying to save everything we can." She had just remodeled her home but was now loading personal belongings into the back of a truck.

"To be honest with you, we don't have no money to start over," a resident of nearby Melville told local television station KALB. "I don't know what we're going to do; we just live day to day and try to survive."

In Krotz Springs, evacuations have begun in stages. Officials estimate the levees may be overtopped in the next few days. Residents were making runs on the grocery stores ahead of inundation, although school and municipal business proceeded as usual. One resident told the *World Socialist Web Site* that many people were fleeing to Texas, the same destination of evacuees from New Orleans in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. Much of the population is impoverished, living in trailers or old clapboard houses.

Residents of Grosse Tet expressed mistrust of the US Department of Agriculture's pledges to reimburse farmers for lost crops, raising questions over differences in insurance rules guiding accidental or man-made flooding. A resident told the WSWs that the town was being overrun by bears, poisonous snakes and other wild animals escaping the disaster.

If any of the patchwork of aging levees were to fail, the consequences would be even more devastating.

“The system is under tremendous pressure, and it will be for a long time, so our key concern is making sure that we’re vigilant,” Army Corps spokesman Mike Stack told CNN Tuesday. “We’re out there on the system, making sure the system stays intact while we’re still working with the communities to try to help with the flooding.”

Local governments have relied on small detachments of National Guard troops, volunteers, and jail inmates to sandbag the old earthen floodwalls. The town of Amelia, population 2,000, sank a massive barge into a key shipping channel over the weekend in a bid to block the floods.

In the 5th Levee District in northern Louisiana near the river’s crest, authorities have reported increasing numbers of sand boils, seepages of water at the bases of levees. Reynold Minsky, president of the 5th District, told the press Tuesday, “We’ve got more sand boils than we’ve had in recent days, and we’re going to have more. We know that. They’re popping up in different places that we’ve not had them before.”

Across the river at Greenville, Mississippi, an old earthen levee collapsed Friday under the force of the flow. Sinkholes have since been reported in Greenville, and 100 buildings have been flooded.

The disaster has dealt a staggering blow to the economic life of the region. Thousands have been put out of work, including some 13,000 employed in Mississippi’s riverside casino industry. The closure of these operations costs the state millions of dollars per week in tax revenue, and threatens the permanent collapse of long-struggling communities.

The flood is beginning to reverberate through the broader economy as well. Over three million acres of crops have been destroyed, and the catfish, crawfish, and seafood industries are in danger of being wiped out for several seasons. Mississippi State University agricultural economist John Michael Riley has estimated that farms in the watershed could suffer \$2 billion in losses.

The Coast Guard halted barge traffic on the Mississippi at Natchez Tuesday, interrupting the transport of Midwest agricultural commodities down the river to the Gulf of Mexico. Officials warned that the barge traffic was putting increased pressure on the levees.

The interruption could cost the US economy \$300

million per day, according to the New Orleans port authority.

Ten freight terminals between Baton Rouge and New Orleans have also been forced to suspend operations due to high water. The Gulf States Maritime Association said many docks along the lower Mississippi were underwater.

The port of New Orleans is one of the busiest in the world, connected by the river to the cargo shipping center of Memphis, Tennessee. Fully 60 percent of grain exports are transported down the Mississippi, and one-eighth of the county’s oil is refined in Louisiana, much of it shipped along the river. Numerous chemical plants and other industry between Baton Rouge and the Gulf may also be interrupted or damaged by flooding.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact