

Mississippi River floods threaten cities in many states

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An historic surge of flooding unseen since the Great Mississippi Flood of 1927 threatens states along the Mississippi River valley this spring, from the Midwest to the Deep South. Crumbling flood infrastructure and systemic failures of social planning are wrecking havoc on local communities all across the river system.

Heavy rainfall along with melting snow upriver has caused a bottleneck effect where the Ohio and Mississippi rivers meet near southern Illinois and Missouri. The struggling southern Illinois town of Cairo and its 2,800 residents recently faced the prospect of being completely submerged in up to 18 to 20 feet of water.

By early Sunday morning, the Ohio River reached 59.59 feet in Cairo, surpassing the 1937 record of 59.50 feet. Cairo Mayor Judson Childs ordered the city's residents to evacuate that day, fearing that a newly formed "sand boil," an area of river water seepage due to over-pressured levees, was becoming dangerously large. Sand boils and geysers threaten entire flood walls, levees and wells as high-pressure water seeps up through the soil behind them.

Many southern Illinois communities feared water levels would exceed levee capacities, such as had already happened on Monday to the town of Olive Branch as sandbags gave way. Flooding in Olive Branch affected numerous homes and resulted in significant road closures.

The Springfield, Illinois, *State Journal-Register* noted that quite a few counties declared states of emergency and had instructed residents to evacuate. Emergency coordinators were forced to create shelters with medical facilities to temporarily house those displaced. And while counties and local governments struggle to provide social resources, organizations such as the American Red Cross are similarly under stress and inundated with the spate of severe weather and tornadoes around the country.

The Army Corps of Engineers and authorities from Illinois and Missouri fought over the prospect of blasting a hole at the Birds Point levee downstream from Cairo in order to relieve pressure and prevent flooding upstream. The levee was intentionally breached last in 1937, carrying out a plan enacted by the corps following the record floods a decade earlier.

With record flood water levels this year, breaching the levee was considered again to prevent Cairo from being submerged. Under this plan, 130,000 acres of farmland in Missouri was to be flooded. The plan pitted nearly 3,000 Cairo residents against 90 largely farm families in the southeast Missouri flood plain and nearly 800 people in surrounding areas.

One former resident who lived near Cairo told the *World Socialist Web Site* that the town, like many in the region, was economically in decline with failing flood protection infrastructure. "The few members of my family who stuck it out in Cairo longer than we did have all since moved, albeit just a bit farther north." The town's streets were already flooded from rainfall alone, he noted. "In the 1990s, when Cairo's decline really began, the streets nearest the levee all started to get cratered with giant sinkholes, a lot like the 'sand boils' mentioned in the news reports from Cairo the past couple of days."

He added, speaking with concern for the lives of Cairo residents: "I have a lot of fond memories of the place. It certainly doesn't deserve to get thrown under the bus." In 1950, the city was home to over 12,000 people. Today, a little fewer than 3,000 people call it home. That some politicians in Missouri were willing to allow a town of 3,000 people to be flooded instead of flooding farmlands angered many residents across the region.

The heated dispute between the two states over levee management resulted in Missouri filing a federal lawsuit to protect its farmlands. According to the *Chicago Tribune*, the case went all the way up to the US Supreme Court, which declined to intervene, after federal courts ruled that the Army Corps had the authority to breach the 60-foot-high earthen levees.

Late Monday, engineers proceeded to blast a hole in a levee far north of the Mississippi River, thereby flooding the 130,000 acres of farmland near Birds Point, Missouri, with over 550,000 cubic feet of water. The Ohio River near Cairo was at 61.72 feet before the levees were breached. On Tuesday, the Army Corps blew a mile-wide gap in the levee near New Madrid, Missouri. Families were evacuated in that entire region. By Wednesday, river levels dropped below 60 feet, according to the corps' Water Control Center river gauge, but problems of flooding can persist through the spring. The National Guard has also been sent in at various flooding locations.

Most farmers in the southeast Missouri region are insured with aged contingency plans made for such a flooding after 1927. Easement plans in that time period were created by the federal government to compensate for losses by breaching levees. But questions remain as to how much the insurance would cover for damages. The *West Kentucky Star* notes that 25 farmers have brought a lawsuit against the federal government stating that easements do not adequately compensate for land and crop losses.

Those without crop insurance will not be able to seek compensation for their losses outside of potential government loans. Agricultural Secretary Tom Vilsack has suggested those who lose their homes may tentatively be eligible for rural housing loans from the government. Crop losses of soybean, corn, cotton, rice, etc., can also result in higher market prices on top of already rising prices for food commodities.

As water levels recede upriver, problems continue to fester downriver, with worries of further flooding in Caruthersville, Missouri. In Kentucky, Governor Beshear's office declared a state of emergency with severe flood warnings in effect along the Kentucky and Tennessee regions of the Mississippi. The office's press release noted a Kentucky Department of Public Health advisory which warned "Kentuckians that contact with flood waters should be avoided whenever possible as they may contain contaminants that could pose health hazards." The flooding of agricultural acreage bears the prospect of fertilizer, pesticides, and other toxic chemicals inundating populous regions downstream.

Meanwhile, the potential threat of further damaging weather continues—including hail, high winds, heavy rain and possible tornadoes.

The AP reports that swollen waterways all the way down to Mississippi and Louisiana pose serious threats. The river continues to rise along hundreds of levees in those states all the way down to the Gulf of Mexico. Many areas along the river face the possibility of record water levels—from Vicksburg, Mississippi, to New Orleans. Gambling barge casinos along the river are expected to shut down, affecting 10,000 workers in Mississippi alone.

Louisiana is still recovering from Hurricane Katrina in 2005, when levees broke and 80 percent of New Orleans was submerged. The vast majority of hodgepodge rebuilding efforts, however, have been to protect the city from a hurricane surge, not from river flooding. Sand boils and leaks are expected at various points.

The AP report also notes that nearly "241 miles of levees in the Mississippi River system between Cape Girardeau, Missouri, and the Gulf of Mexico need to be heightened or strengthened to meet the corps' standards." The entire patchwork system of flood plain management along the Mississippi River continues to be heavily tested with significant economic and social consequences expected. If the levees topple, numerous towns could be underwater with backwaters pushing into residential areas.

The entire flood protection system and its patchwork system of levees along the Mississippi River demonstrate the failure to rationally manage major hydrological systems in the United States. It is above all a failure of capitalism, where complex natural, economic and social problems are subordinated wholly to the interests of private profit instead of scientific planning. Although scientists and engineers have long warned of systemic flood problems and the consequences of changes in climate, little has been done to address these issues. Decades of "free market" deregulation with multiple administrations and a lack of comprehensive oversight have made natural disasters such as flooding into catastrophic social problems.

A report by the *Christian Science Monitor* nearly three years ago made these problems clear when severe floods inundated river systems: "The flooding has raised questions about the adequacy of the patchwork system—in which little information is known about where levees exist, who maintains them, and what their condition is—even as towns downstream hurry to fortify their own levees in preparation for the cresting floodwaters still moving south." The report added that levees are built to the highly inadequate 100-year flood plain standard, where there is a one percent chance that a flood will breach a levee in any given year. In Netherlands, levees for ocean flooding are built to a 10,000-year standard with inland levees "designed at least to a 250-year standard and usually in excess of 1,250 years."

In the United States, levees operate on the lowest common denominator, cheaply built and decades outdated. The *Christian Science Monitor* report also noted that several "lessons and recommendations emerged from the 1993 floods, but few have been acted upon."

In 2009, the American Society of Civil Engineers issued a national infrastructure report card. The nation's levee systems were given a grade of a "D-." Its recommendations called for a systemic overhaul of the flood protection system, suggesting that it would take at least \$50 billion to upgrade these levees adequately.

Fully 43 percent of the US population lives in counties near levees. Nearly 10 percent of levees are expected to fail in the event of a flood. No comprehensive inventory and inspection system for levees exists to this day.

Systemic planning and billions of dollars are needed to update levees, restore wetlands, and to transform the entire flood plain management on a rational and ecologically-sound basis. Few of these recommendations have been implemented, and no plans are being carried out to comprehensively address these problems. Yet both the Democratic and Republican parties seek to cut trillions in funds from social programs and infrastructure—including critical physical infrastructure—as they guarantee trillions for Wall Street. The federal and state governments seek to place the burden of natural disasters on individuals, families and financially strapped local communities. As a result, masses of working people are exposed to financial ruin and life-threatening environmental disasters.



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