

# Mississippi floods pose disasters for multiple states

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Thousands of people from Illinois to Mississippi have been evacuated from their homes as record flood levels inundate the Mississippi River and its tributaries. Residents in towns all along the river are sandbagging banks, and millions of acres of farmland are threatened with inundation. Authorities fear this could be the worst flood disaster to affect the Mississippi watershed since before the Great Depression.

The Mississippi flood of 1927 was one of the biggest disasters in US history, affecting an area of more than 23,000 square miles. The 1927 flood caused up to 1,000 deaths and left 600,000 homeless. In 1928, the federal government instituted a patchwork system of levees to assist in flood management. This system greatly mitigated the threat of inundation in the floodplain areas, which were developed as farmland and lower-cost residential areas.

Today, however, the flood management system of locks and levees are increasingly distressed and under-maintained, with no comprehensive inventory and regulatory system in place.

Residents in the South have already been affected by severe storms that have left thousands homeless and awaiting Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) aid. (See “Alabama residents struggle in storm’s aftermath”) A large swath of the Deep South now faces a twin disaster of historic proportions with many experts expecting the rapidly rising Mississippi River to exceed the levels of the 1927 flood levels. Numerous levees around the river are now under high-pressure stress from rising floodwaters and pose the risk of failure, threatening to overrun cities.

The Mississippi River watershed drains about 41 percent of the continental United States. According to the National Weather Service, above-normal precipitation in the winter months had resulted in frozen, water-saturated and snow-covered grounds in the North. Snowmelts and runoffs from saturated soils caused the Mississippi watershed to swell as temperatures rose. The magnitude of rising water levels has now worsened due to the higher than normal rainfalls this spring. Much of this was predicted by forecasters and scientists. Numerous scientists have warned that global warming would lead to higher incidences of extreme climate events, including extreme precipitation levels and flood surges.

Extremely high levels of flooding from Canada and the Dakotas had spread to Illinois, Missouri, Kentucky, Tennessee and Arkansas. Record levels of floods are expected to hit Mississippi

and Louisiana in the coming days, with the most severe flooding expected in a week or two. In total, eight states have been affected so far. On Wednesday, the Mississippi exceeded the 46-foot mark set in 1937 in Caruthersville, Missouri, with a crest of 49.50 feet expected Sunday.

The US Army Corps of Engineers blasted a Missouri levee to prevent towns like Cairo, Illinois from being submerged by the Ohio and Mississippi rivers. (See “Mississippi River floods threaten cities in many states”) Approximately 130,000 acres of prime farmland in southeast Missouri were flooded, temporarily easing pressure upstream and dropping water levels a foot and a half. But water is expected to surge downstream once again, threatening multiple states with historic flood disasters. The town of Olive Branch, Illinois was already flooded with major roadways closed and residents evacuated. Nearly 4,000 residents have evacuated their homes because of flooding in Kentucky.

On Wednesday, President Obama declared parts of Tennessee, Mississippi and Kentucky disasters, making them eligible for federal help with relief efforts. But the relief does not account for individual assistance. In all likelihood federal assistance will be meager and insubstantial, given historical precedent with natural disasters in the last decade.

On Thursday, water inundated downtown Memphis—threatening homes along Mud Island, a community of about 5,000 residents. Local emergency workers went from house to house asking people to leave. The river level at Memphis is approaching 46 feet and is expected to rise another 3 feet when it crests in the coming week. Another storm system expected to hit the region will compound the flooding.

If the river crests at 48 feet, it would be very close to the all-time record set in 1937 at 48.70 feet. But the population in Memphis today is far greater than it was nearly 70 years ago, along with much higher property values. Memphis’s concrete flood wall system was built in the late 1940s. Officials predict that 2,832 properties will be affected if the river crests at 48 feet.

According to *USA Today*, disaster fears have prompted an emergency declaration for 920,000 residents in Memphis and surrounding Shelby County, Tennessee. Roads have been blocked and over 200 people have been evacuated to shelters.

The city of Dyersburg, Tennessee is experiencing unprecedented flooding, according to CBS News. The river has already reached record levels and is expected to crest at 51 feet. Even though the town is 20 miles from the Mississippi River, its tributary, the

Forked Deer River, has been receiving backflows causing water to rise to 28 feet.

Dyersburg's mayor, John Holden, has instructed residents to evacuate, expecting backflows to flood the city. There is also concern that the levees around the Mississippi near the Great River Road, 18 miles from the city, will be toppled, posing further disaster for the community. Dyersburg is still recovering from last year's historic flood when the tributary rose to 32 feet. Some 400 homes and businesses were lost in the flooding. The mayor told CBS, "Some people will probably give up and not move back to this community." Many left permanently after last year's flooding.

In Arkansas, the White River, a tributary of the big river, is expected to crest at its highest ever level of 40 feet near Des Arc, breaking a 1949 record. The White River has overflowed near the town of Cotton Plant, forcing a mandatory evacuation. At least eight people have died due to flooding in Arkansas in the last week and 16 deaths have been attributed to the extreme weather that has afflicted the region since late April. According to AP, authorities found the body of a man in the floodwaters in eastern Arkansas' Prairie County.

More than 60 of the state's 75 counties have been declared disaster areas, owing to tornadoes and flooding that has hit the state recently.

Flooding has also closed a busy 23-mile section of Interstate 40 in eastern Arkansas. Commercial traffic has been re-routed and trucking companies warn that businesses will be disrupted, according to *Business Week*. The interstate is one of the nation's major trucking points, affecting an area between Little Rock and Memphis. A two-hour drive will now take five to six hours, causing major disruptions in supply chains in an area particularly important to interstate commerce.

Trucking companies have cut routes short due to federal limits on how long a commercial truck driver can work, usually 10 to 11 hours before mandatory breaks. Truckers are afraid of losing work hours. Interstate 40 is expected to be closed all weekend; this is the first time flooding has ever forced a part of it to be shut down.

In the state of Mississippi, President Obama has signed an emergency declaration for 11 counties with major flooding expected. The Mississippi River will crest in Vicksburg on May 20 at 57.50 feet, according to WAPT-TV of Jackson, Mississippi. On Wednesday afternoon, the river was at 47.20 feet.

Evacuation orders have been issued for Vicksburg's residents. But many residents face the prospect of becoming homeless in the coming days with inadequate federal and state funding. United Way of West Central Mississippi is already overloaded with requests to help with temporary housing costs for those displaced by flooding. The United Way Board has not yet approved the funds, and will find housing for the families. If families are approved for assistance, they will only be disbursed 30 days' worth of housing costs.

Governor Haley Barbour of Mississippi has already said there's going to be a "monumental" level of flooding. He expects thousands to face evacuations. But as WAPT-TV notes, "Barbour said the state won't provide assistance for the evacuations. Instead, he said people who need help should rely on friends, relatives or even strangers who are willing to lend a hand."

Thousands of jobs could be lost temporarily due to flooding. Over 900,000 acres of cropland could be flooded and destroyed, with crop loss damages in excess of \$100 million, including damages to the catfish industry, according to Barbour. Backwater flooding from tributaries such as the Yazoo River could inundate levees not managed by the federal government. Record levels of flooding are expected in the town of Natchez, Mississippi as well.

A spokesperson for the Army Corps in Vicksburg commented on the situation saying: "There's never been a flood of this magnitude on the upper Mississippi. It's testing the outer limits of our system."

In Louisiana, shippers, ports and the chemical industry are racing against time to dredge the river in order to prevent a major channel flowing into the Gulf of Mexico from getting clogged, according to the AP. The state also plans to evacuate inmates at the maximum-security Louisiana State Penitentiary at Angola, which is very flood-prone.

The Army Corps in Louisiana is also seriously considering opening the 58-year-old Morganza floodway near Baton Rouge and the Bonnet Carre floodway about 30 miles north of New Orleans for the first time in 38 years, according to CBS News.

A report in the *Wall Street Journal* also notes that serious dangers are also being posed by flood runoffs. "One risk, scientists cautioned, is fertilizer runoff from the flooded farm country along the Mississippi. As it moves downstream, they predicted it would contribute to the largest-ever summertime depletion of oxygen in the Gulf of Mexico, posing a substantial risk to marine life." With the BP disaster last year, this can only worsen problems in the Gulf.

Higher than normal levels of nitrate runoffs are also sparking health concerns over drinking water. Much of the Midwest gets its water from rivers and "scientists say they'll be monitoring to see whether the floodwaters show elevated levels of nitrate." Nitrate can cause sickness, particularly in infants. Despite governmental requirements that drinking water treatment plants filter out nitrates, such a scenario with fast-moving waters and higher sedimentation could still pose serious risks.

The disastrous consequences for human lives and the environment continue to magnify the utter failure of the flood-management system in the United States. Levees in the United States are said to be built to withstand a "100-year flood," their deterioration notwithstanding. However, Gene Rench of the National Weather Service has grimly noted, "Right now the Mississippi River is in the process of going through what we call an epic flood, meaning it's more than historic, it's more than a 100-year flood, it's more like a 500 year flood."



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