

Mississippi River flood spills into central Louisiana

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In a bid to protect Louisiana's urban centers from catastrophic flooding, the US Army Corps of Engineers opened the Morganza Floodway on Saturday. The spillway, located 45 miles northwest of Louisiana's capital Baton Rouge, is diverting some of the Mississippi River's flow into the Atchafalaya Basin.

The action will affect some 25,000 residents in the region, including thousands who will lose everything. Millions of acres of crops will be ruined.

The Army Corps has said that the inundation may be 25 feet deep and stand for three weeks.

On Saturday the Army Corps opened only one of the Morganza's 125 bays, which is drawing off 10,000 cubic feet per second of water from the Mississippi. More gates will be opened slowly over the next few days, increasing the flow rate to 125,000 cubic feet per second.

St. Landry Parish President Don Menard ordered the mandatory evacuation of low-lying communities just south of the spillway Sunday as water rushed in. In a news release, Menard stated, "By 5 p.m., everyone in the affected areas **MUST BE OUT!**"

Louisiana Governor Bobby Jindal had previously recommended that residents to the south of the Morganza undertake voluntary evacuations. Left to respond to the disaster on their own, small towns are frantically sandbagging, many using jail prisoners.

Residents throughout the bayou country are among the poorest in the US. The local economy centers on the seafood and oil industries, which are both expected to

be heavily impacted by the disaster. Municipalities are already struggling under the weight of the broader economic crisis, threadbare budgets, and last year's devastating BP oil spill.

Morgan City, Berwick, Krotz Springs and other Louisiana towns have 10 to 20 foot floodwalls. Outlying communities around these towns, however, face the possibility of permanent destruction. Many residents have no flood insurance or means of rebuilding, and their homes consisted of little more than campsites.

Many of the marine-based businesses are located on the river side of floodwalls, and will be wiped out. "Just a little country town that don't mean nothing," a resident of the town of Amelia, Louisiana (population 2,400) commented to the Baton Rouge *Advocate* as water rose Sunday. "I think it will ruin this community. I think you can almost kiss everything goodbye."

In Butte LaRose, residents told the press that local authorities had said they needed to pack all of their belongings. "They told us to move as though we were moving—period—not coming back, not to leave so much as a toothpick behind," one woman said.

The Mississippi River at Baton Rouge (population 230,000) had risen to 44.06 feet by Saturday night and is expected to reach 45 feet on Monday as the crest moves southward. Although the city's levees range in height from 47.3 feet to 51 feet, the force of the water—projected to flow at 1.62 million cubic feet per second at its crest—is more than the city's levee system was built to withstand. The diversion of water at the Morganza floodway is an attempt to draw the flow rate

down to the Baton Rouge levee capacity.

The Army Corps warned that without opening the Morganza, New Orleans risked being flooded on a scale even worse than in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in 2005. Even with the spillway diversion, however, the city's 20-foot levees are vulnerable to collapse from the force of the flow, and a crest of 19.5 feet. A levee breach in the city could trigger a "Niagara Falls or more pouring of the river for an extended period of time," according to John Barry, author of *Rising Tide: The Great Mississippi Flood of 1927 and How It Changed America*.

The river is expected to crest at Greenville, Mississippi Monday at 64.5 feet, 16.5 feet above flood stage. An earthen levee near the city collapsed Friday night after being overtopped. Residents in the area had been trying to fortify the half-mile wide wall with extra earth and plastic before the breach. "It's adding extra stress to the mainline levees, but they are holding," Army Corps spokesman Kavanaugh Breazeale said Saturday.

Ninety miles to the south, at Vicksburg, Mississippi, all major roads have been closed and 340 homes and 30 businesses have already been inundated. The crest is not expected to reach Morganza until May 25.



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