

Mississippi flood cripples river communities

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As the flood-stricken area widened Wednesday across the US Deep South, the Mississippi River's swollen waters claimed the life of a Vicksburg man.

Firefighters pulled 69-year-old Walter Cook from chest-deep floodwaters after he was seen clinging to a fence in downtown Vicksburg, Mississippi. The river crested at 57.1 feet in the city Thursday. At least 2,000 residents were forced to evacuate to shelters.

Further south in Natchez, Mississippi, the National Weather Service (NWS) projects a crest of 62.5 feet on Saturday. The estimate is 6 inches lower than previous projections, but still 14.5 feet above flood stage for the city.

The crest will come lower but sooner because of the collapse of an old earthen levee at the upriver city of Greenville last Friday.

The river level will remain high for weeks, according to NWS hydrologist Marty Pope, putting strain on other floodwalls. "Residents who live along the river need to keep an eye out and be vigilant," Pope told CNN Thursday. "We're not going to fall to the kind of levels we got to during the large 2008 flood until early June, and won't fall below flood stage until mid-to-late June."

The state levee commission has been hastily reinforcing the backwater levees along the Yazoo River near its confluence with the Mississippi just outside of Vicksburg. Crews have been coating the levees with plastic to prevent the appearance of seepages, or sand boils, at the base of the walls.

Downriver, the US Army Corps of Engineers opened more bays on the Morganza Floodway, increasing the

rate of water surging into Louisiana to 114,000 cubic feet per second.

South of the spillway, mandatory evacuations were announced for the weekend in the small Louisiana town of Butte La Rose and surrounding communities. The St. Martin Parish sheriff's office issued an order declaring that by 8 a.m. Saturday "the area will be secured and no one will be allowed to enter." The town of Krotz Springs is expected to be inundated with 10 feet of water. Assumption Parish has canceled school for the remainder of the school year because of the disaster.

Across the bayou region, 25,000 residents are to be affected by flooding. Thousands will see their homes and livelihoods destroyed.

At least 4,800 people have already been rendered homeless in Mississippi, including 2,000 in Vicksburg. The state's Emergency Management Agency estimates that by the time the crest reaches the Gulf of Mexico, over 6,000 Mississippians will be forced out of their homes.

These residents, who are among the poorest people in the US, now face weeks living in church-run shelters and bleak prospects of rebuilding.

Evacuees from the devastated town of Tunica, Mississippi, have been camping in the parking lot outside the Tunica Arena. County officials gave them until June 10 to move—well before the floodwaters are projected to recede. Even after the water is gone, residents will be confronted with debris, displaced wildlife, and toxic residue on their properties that will be costly to clean up.

Thousands without flood insurance or savings were

informed by local officials that they must evacuate under the expectation that their dislocation would be permanent. Residents were compelled to frantically pack personal belongings into their vehicles.

The Obama administration has emphasized that flood victims must apply for aid, mainly in the form of loans that they will have to repay with interest. As with its response to the tornadoes that heavily damaged the region only last month, the federal government has insisted that funding-starved state and local governments lead the recovery.

The damage estimates continue to rise. Millions of acres of crops have been lost, transit lines have been interrupted, and tens of thousands of residents have been put out of work. With major industries shut down, state and local tax revenue is flagging. The crisis signals drastic cuts to already bare budgets in the coming year.

Southern Louisiana's seafood industry, devastated by last year's BP oil spill, is facing catastrophic losses. The oil spill destroyed most of Louisiana's oyster beds, and the recovering fisheries will be killed off in two weeks by the inundation of freshwater.

"The oyster people, they're screwed again," United Commercial Fisherman's Association president George Barisich commented to Al Jazeera reporters Thursday. "A lot of people, this is wearing down on them. For the people with the small boats, it's going to wipe them out. People have heart attacks over this." The soonest oyster beds could be reestablished is in August, for harvest in 2013, according to the Office of Marine Fisheries.

Ball State University's Center for Business and Economic Research Director Michael Hicks told the *New York Times* that the economic toll was "in the \$6 billion to \$9 billion range for total damages from Memphis southward to the gulf."

The consequences will ripple through the agricultural and energy sectors, driving up the costs of basic goods in the region and more broadly. The river serves as a primary conduit for grain export as well as domestic oil

supply.

On Tuesday, the Coast Guard halted barge traffic along a 15-mile stretch of the river at Natchez over concerns that the levees were under a dangerous amount of strain from the flow rate of the cresting water. Further south, high water forced 10 freight terminals to suspend operations.



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