Floodwaters devastate North Dakota city

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Thousands of residents in Minot, North Dakota have been forced to double up with friends and relatives or sleep on cots at Red Cross shelters as floodwaters from the Souris River hit record levels Sunday. More than 4,000 homes and 300 businesses have been inundated, displacing nearly a third of the city's 41,000 residents.

Many homes were under nearly a dozen feet of water Monday with flood levels receding only five inches. A mile-long levee protecting thousands of other homes remains in danger of being overrun and health officials have issued orders to boil water because of contamination dangers in the water and sewerage system.

The National Weather Service said water levels would drop just two feet by midweek and areas could remain flooded until mid to late July.

Like a series of other disasters this year, the flooding in North Dakota has once again brought to light the woefully inadequate and decaying infrastructure system in the US. It has also highlighted the callous and indifferent response of the Obama administration and state authorities to the plight of the mostly working class victims of these catastrophes.

Residents of Minot face the long and arduous task of rebuilding homes and lives with little or no government relief. Officials from the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) acknowledged that only 375 out of 4,000 homes in the devastated area had federal flood insurance. Standard homeowners' policies do not include flood protection.

Many owners said they had been led to believe it was unnecessary to purchase federal insurance after a devastating 1969 flood led to construction of levees and straightening of the river channel. In 2000, federal officials revised flood maps and lifted requirements that homeowners buy federal flood protection, saying even in the improbable event of a historic flood, the Souris was likely to remain within its banks. Water levels last week were six times higher than what the system was designed to withstand.

After initially rejecting the state's application for assistance for private homeowners and businesses, FEMA approved individual rebuilding assistance for Burleigh County—where the state capital of Bismark is located—and Minot's Ward County. State officials are pushing to expand aid to 20 other counties, as well as to the Turtle Mountain Chippewa and Spirit Lake Sioux reservations.

The federal assistance is capped at a little more than $30,000, the Associated Press reported, but the state's US senator, Kent Conrad, said residents were likely to get no more than $7,000 to $8,000—the typical amounts provided to victims of severe flooding in Nashville, Tennessee last year.

According to reports, state lawmakers are not expected to discuss flood relief until a special session in the fall. The state government, which has lavished tax cuts on the oil industry and other business interests, has done little more than urge the public to contribute donations to a flood relief fund.

Les Younger, a retired Air Force veteran who works at the nearby at Minot Air Force Base, and his wife, Jacque, a seamstress, told the AP they did not buy flood insurance because they thought their home was far enough from the river. Rebuilding "is going to be very tough, because we don't have a lot of savings," Jacque Younger said.

"I don't know what I'll do," Dona Young, 87, told the *Bismark Tribune*. "What would you do if everything you owned was suddenly soaked? You can't just wring it out."

The state has been hit by repeated flooding this year. The Red River flooded to near record heights for the third consecutive year, forcing weeks of frantic efforts to protect Fargo, the state's largest city. Later, the unprecedented rise of the Missouri River forced Bismarck, the state's capital and second largest city, into anti-flood efforts expected to last the whole summer.

The Souris—known locally as the "Mouse River" from its English translation of the French name—originates in Saskatchewan, Canada and wanders south through North Dakota and back into the Canadian province of Manitoba. Heavy snows this winter and large rainfall swelled the

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river eight feet over the record level set in 1881. It is currently flowing at 215 times its normal rate for this time of year.

High waters in western Canada are worsening the situation in an area already saturated by extended flooding this spring, CTV Winnipeg reported. Steve Ashton, the minister responsible for emergency measures in Manitoba said communities such as Melita, Souris and Wawanesa will have to raise their dikes by as much as eight feet. Saskatchewan is also suffering from unprecedented flooding, disrupting the energy industry and leaving nearly 5 million acres of farmland unplanted.

Adding to the distress in Minot is the hot-house growth of the city over the last few years, as a mini-oil boom has drawn in workers from Texas, Michigan, Ohio and other economically devastated states. The city's population has grown 12 percent over the last decade largely driven by the Bakken shale field that has made North Dakota one of the top oil producers in the US.

Lisa Tankersley, whose husband was one of thousands to land a job in the oil fields arrived in her home last week after a two-day drive from East Texas. Fifteen minutes later, before unpacking any boxes, she was ordered by police to evacuate because of coming floodwaters, the *New York Times* reported.

"I was freaking out," she said, adding that she was about to drive back to Texas until she decided to stay indefinitely in the apartment of friends who had also migrated north. "Here I am, hundreds of miles from home, with my two children and all my worldly belongings, and I have no place to live."

With home vacancy rates of less than one percent, housing is so difficult to find, the *Times* reported, that every hotel in town has been booked, almost solid, for years. "The lack of housing has already emerged as a serious obstacle for the people who were displaced," the newspaper reported Monday.

As recent flooding on the Mississippi and Missouri rivers underscored, the federal government has chiefly neglected the maintenance of the levee system. In his 2012 budget proposal, Obama calls for a $913 million cut in the already meager $5.4 billion budget of the Army Corps of Engineers civil works program.

For his part, North Dakota's Republican governor, Jack Dalrymple, has concentrated on a program of deregulation and tax cuts for the energy industry and other businesses. "We came to it out of necessity," Dalrymple said. "Those steps really paid off big time."

In fact, the state saw the 14th largest growth of income inequality in the US over the last two decades with the top five percent of families taking in average incomes 10.4 times as large as the poorest 20 percent of families. Many of those losing their homes in Minot lived in trailers—the most vulnerable shelter to the elements.

Residents now have to confront the bureaucratic nightmare of applying for loans and emergency aid from FEMA, which is notorious for delaying or rejecting outright the claims of storm and flood victims.

A recent article in the *Birmingham News* on the denial claims to Alabama tornado victims in April noted the countless complaints against FEMA across the country. In one case, a lawsuit alleges FEMA improperly denied thousands of poor farm workers in Texas money to repair their homes after Hurricane Dolly in 2008 based on so-called "insufficient damage" findings.

In the Texas cases, 38,000 families applied for assistance and 22,000 applications were denied. A group of Rio Grande Valley homeowners represented in the lawsuit learned that the reason behind the denials was a concept used by FEMA called "deferred maintenance," the suit states. Jerry Wesevich, an attorney with Texas Rio Grande Legal Aid who represents the plaintiffs, said the designation is "shorthand term that FEMA uses when it determines somehow that a condition of a home prior to the disaster caused the damage after the storm."

"They never write down 'deferred maintenance,'" he said. "But their excuse is, it's in the inspector's judgment that if the house was a piece of (junk) beforehand, they'll deny it. But they won't tell the public what it is based on."

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