More flooding triggers emergency evacuations in North Dakota

Naomi Spencer
24 June 2011

More than 10,000 residents of Minot, North Dakota, have been ordered to evacuate ahead of unprecedented flooding along the Souris River. The Souris cuts through the middle of the city, which is located less than 60 miles south of the Canadian border and has a population of 40,000.

Snowmelt and heavy rains have filled reservoirs in the northern US and Canada, prompting emergency releases into the river systems of the Midwest. For the past several months, the region has been stricken by a series of historic floods and severe storms.

In Minot, Mayor Curt Zimbelman issued a mandatory evacuation order Wednesday, with a deadline for 6 p.m., warning that the river would top the levees more rapidly than previously estimated. Residents were told to "do their last-minute thing and be prepared to move quickly." The mayor added, "Be cautious and be courteous, I guess."

North Dakota Governor Jack Dalrymple, speaking to the *Minot Daily News* Thursday, said that there was "a tremendous surge on the way…. It will be dramatic and some people will no doubt feel alarmed at the speed with which the water comes up in Minot. In two days time, it will be a very, very rapid rise."

The Souris River is projected to swell to 1,563 feet above sea level by the weekend. The river level will surpass by more than 7 feet the historic flood of 1969 that submerged part of Minot, as well as the 1881 record of 1,558 feet, by the time it crests Sunday or Monday. Parts of the city will be flooded by 15 feet of water.

On Thursday afternoon, Minot city officials warned the crest could be 3 feet higher than these current estimates, and moving at a greater velocity, after the federal Army Corps of Engineers opened additional gates on the Lake Darling Dam. Already rushing into the Souris at 18,000 cubic feet per second, water was increased to a flow rate of 22,000 cubic feet per second by Thursday evening, and to 28,000 cubic feet per second by Friday.

Sirens began sounding at 1 p.m. Wednesday to alert residents that they had a mere five hours to get out. Some 500 state National Guard soldiers were dispatched to perform last-minute sandbagging, which allowed neighborhoods a few additional hours' time to empty.

The events in Minot bear uncanny resemblance to those played out in countless communities across the flood-stricken Midwest and South in recent months. Interviews and coverage by local media reveal that many of those forced to evacuate will not be able to return. Residents in the impacted neighborhoods of Minot, many low-income, elderly, or young working class families living in mobile homes, were among those prompted to evacuate a few weeks before the latest flooding.

Thousands of people struggled to pack their belongings into trucks and crowd onto the highways in search of hotel vacancies or other lodgings. "There are no hotel rooms, no campers to rent, nothing," one resident told the Associated Press Wednesday. She had no choice but to shelter in a van with family members.

Local news reported scores of people had gathered on the Broadway Bridge to watch the river and bumper-to-bumper traffic of evacuees. Residents said that from the bridge they had witnessed secondary streets become inundated in the span of an hour. As of Thursday afternoon, one trailer park was already submerged in several feet of water.

At least four levees upriver from the city are already breaching. "There's a lot more water up there than

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there was the last time I looked and I thought there was a lot of water then," Zimbelman told the *Minot Daily News* Thursday after a helicopter flyover of a 25-mile stretch. "It's coming and we know what's going to happen in the next few days and it's sad. There are a lot of people up and down. It's not just Minot, it's the whole valley, and it's going to be for a while."

The National Weather Service estimates that flooded areas will remain submerged until August.

Floodwaters are rising along the Missouri River to the south, forcing other towns to evacuate. The region was flooded earlier in the month after the Army Corps began opening gates on the Gavins Point Dam to spare the South Dakota cities of Pierre and Fort Pierre (see "Rising economic toll from US flooding, storms").

The Army Corps had been maintaining a release of 150,000 cubic feet per second of water for the past two weeks, a flow rate the agency said would be the maximum amount. However, a storm system bringing heavy rain and warm temperatures, which accelerated snowmelt, prompted officials to announce abruptly on Tuesday that the Corps would throw open more floodgates. As of Thursday, the Gavins Point floodway was releasing 160,000 cubic feet per second.

Local officials, angered and thrown into disarray by the lack of warning, have scrambled to add sandbags to the patchwork of aging levees along the Missouri, reinforce critical infrastructure, and evacuate more residents.

Two nuclear power plants in Nebraska, the Cooper Nuclear Station and Fort Calhoun, are increasingly vulnerable to the rising waters. Both plants have issued "unusual event" alerts, although the Nebraska Public Power District and the federal Nuclear Regulatory Commission have sought to downplay the risk posed by the flood (see "Report reveals majority of US nuclear plants are leaking radioactivity").

Six hundred people in Holt County, Missouri, were ordered to leave Wednesday after another levee gave way, sending 9 more feet of water into the already evacuated town of Corning.

Fremont County, Missouri, authorities ordered residents to avoid an area near Interstate highway 29 (I-29) as the river threatened to breach levees in the area. The Interstate has been shut down, crippling commerce and travel. The state's Department of Transportation said parts of I-29 could remain impassible through mid-August.

Every bridge between St. Joseph, Missouri, and Omaha, Nebraska, has been closed. Sections of major highways, including US 275 and US 136 in northern Missouri, are also closed.

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