More than 500 unaccounted for in Colorado floods

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Beginning on Wednesday, heavy rains have caused unprecedented flooding in the state of Colorado. As of Sunday, there are several confirmed deaths and more than 500 people missing in what is being described as a 500-to-1,000-year flood. The National Weather Service reported that 1.73 inches of rain fell southeast of Denver in less than 30 minutes. Some areas have received more than 15 inches of rain since the flooding began. More rain is expected in the coming week.

Rains have washed away bridges and roads. Houses have fallen into the rivers. In the Big Thompson Canyon area, Highway 34 has been washed out, cutting off a major route to Estes Park, which, as of Saturday, had only radio communication with the outside world.

President Barack Obama declared a state of emergency late Saturday, and said federal assistance would be available to the state. So far, however, only a measly $5 million in federal funds has been set aside to aid the victims of the floods. In Boulder County alone, an estimated $150 million will be needed just to repair 100 to 150 miles of roads and 20 to 30 bridges. According to County Transportation Director George Gerstle, it will cost 10 to 15 times the county's normal annual budget.

In the foothills of the Rocky Mountains, during lulls in the rain, rescuers struggled to rescue trapped survivors. Many narrow canyon roads are underwater or washed out. On Saturday, the flood surged down out of the hills and onto the flat plains east of the mountains, cutting off more communities. The Denver Post reports that helicopters are being used to airlift people out of canyon areas that face further flooding. Desperate residents have surrounded homes and businesses with sandbags and makeshift flood barriers.

Longmont, south of Fort Collins in the plains just east of the Rocky Mountains, has experienced severe flooding. Aerial video footage taken Friday shows the catastrophic results of the St. Vrain River overflowing.

In Greely, Colorado Front Range floodwaters are pouring into the South Platte River. (The Front Range is the name of the mountain range of the Southern Rocky Mountains located in central Colorado.) In this area a "broken" oil or gas pipeline was reported, but its identity was not disclosed. Other pipelines may have been compromised as well, but few details have been released. Oil and gas industry crews have been monitoring wells drilled into the flood plain east of Greely in Weld County. Some crude oil has been seen in the water from oil tanks tipped over by floodwaters.

Gary Wockner of Clean Water Action warned that "Fracking and operating oil and gas facilities in floodplains is extremely risky. Flood waters can topple facilities and spread oil, gas, and cancer-causing fracking chemicals across vast landscapes making contamination and clean-up efforts exponentially worse and more complicated."

Rising flood waters also have overflowed sewage treatment plants at Milliken, Evans, and elsewhere. Several communities have issued "boil advisories," meaning water should be boiled thoroughly before drinking or cooking meals with it.

Bridges over the South Platte River have been closed as far east as Morgan County since the waters began to overflow the bridges.

Colorado Governor John Hickenlooper has called out the National Guard to assist with helicopters and truck convoys. Residents of the flood-stricken towns were advised to leave at once, or be prepared to suffer for weeks without electricity, running water, and basic supplies. Many people wanted to stay and watch over their homes. Boulder County Sheriff Joe Pelle said they would not force evacuations, but rescuers will not go

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back to rescue people who insist in staying in their homes.

On Sunday, rain was still coming down, preventing aerial searches for the missing. The National Weather Service has issued flood warnings for 15 counties. In the mountainous western half of the state, mudslides have been an added danger.

A helicopter surveillance flight carrying Governor Hickenlooper and members of Colorado's congressional delegation was diverted twice to pick up people waving for help below.

The confirmed deaths so far include a young man and woman, both aged 19, who were swept away by the floodwaters after leaving their car in Boulder County last Thursday. The woman left the car first, then the man jumped out to try to save her. Both bodies have been recovered.

Another body was found in a collapsed home in Jamestown, also in Boulder County. A fourth body was recovered on a roadway in Colorado Springs in El Paso County.

A 60-year-old woman was washed away from her home in Larimer County. The house was demolished and neighbors saw her being swept away. She is presumed dead, but her body has not been recovered.

On Sunday, authorities announced that an 80-year-old woman who had unspecified injuries is now presumed dead.

The death toll will almost certainly rise once the flood waters recede. Boulder County Sheriff Joe Pelle said, "We have not begun to search collapsed structures, debris piles, and washouts, where we would likely find human remains."

The skies cleared for a brief period on Friday and Saturday, allowing more evacuations, before the rains resumed on Sunday.

The Colorado floods follow the wettest summer in the US in nine years. A very slow-moving upper-level atmospheric low- pressure zone has persisted over Utah, west of Colorado, for some time, bringing a monsoon moisture northeastward up from the Pacific Ocean, across Mexico and over New Mexico and Colorado. This moisture is the source of the Colorado rains.

According to Brad Udall, director of the Getches-Wilkinson Center for Natural Resources, Energy and the Environment of The University of Colorado at Boulder, the severity of the flooding is the result of a combination of several factors, including drought-hardened soil and recent wildfires that have removed vegetation. Udall told National Geographic, "As the climate warms further, the hydrologic cycle is going to get more intense. … Between the fires last year and this year, the unprecedented and continuing drought in the Colorado River, and now this shocking event," he continued, "climate change feels very real to me."

Meanwhile, Mexico is bracing for two serious storms: Tropical Storm Manuel is in the Pacific Ocean just off Acapulco, and Hurricane Ingrid is in the Gulf of Mexico off of Veracruz. It is likely that both storms will hit Mexico on opposite coasts at more or less the same time, with a potential for up to 15 inches of rain across the country.

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