

Seven confirmed dead in Colorado flooding

Charles Abelard
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Seven people have been confirmed dead in flooding following a week of torrential downpours along the eastern slopes of the Rocky Mountains in Colorado, the Boulder County Office of Emergency Management reported Monday. Nearly 400 people remain unaccounted for in Larimer County, in north-central Colorado, with many believed to be still stranded in areas cut off by floodwaters, and without access to phone or Internet service.

In Larimer County alone, among the hardest hit areas, an estimated 1,500 homes have been destroyed and another 4,500 damaged, according to preliminary estimates by county authorities. The foothill communities of Larimer and Boulder suffered the worst of the floodwaters, which streamed down mountainsides through canyons to the populated areas below.

Rescue teams spread out across flood-ravaged areas in Colorado as the weather began to clear Sunday night and Monday. The rains are expected to subside as the upper-level low-pressure area weakens and drier air moves into the region. Clear skies will return soon, which will surely be a relief for the beleaguered residents of the area. There may still be heavy showers, but they are moving out of the area that has been hardest hit so far.

As the skies begin to clear and the rains subside, the real work of assessment and cleanup will soon begin. Meanwhile, a cool front has moved into the Central United States, and is expected to stall there. Rain is expected in Kansas, Oklahoma, Missouri, and Arkansas as the front interacts with moist air moving up from the South.

Astounding amounts of rain fell over Colorado in the past week. The Weather Channel reports that Boulder received 14.62 inches of rain from Monday afternoon, September 9, to Thursday afternoon, September 12. Eldorado Springs over the same period received 14.60

inches. Aurora, between noon on Wednesday and Thursday night, received 11.88 inches, and Colorado Springs, 9.08 inches between Wednesday afternoon and Friday morning.

In the city of Boulder, from September 9 through noon on September 13, 14.32 inches of rain fell—including 9.08 inches on September 12 alone. The latter number doubled the previous record rainfall for a single calendar day, 4.80 inches, recorded on July 31, 1919, according to the Western Regional Climate Center.

Although the return of blue skies will be a welcome development, it does not mean the flooding is over or that the missing have been accounted for. In Longmont, just east of the Front Range, 15 National Guard and emergency workers were attempting to evacuate local residents when they were also trapped by rising floodwaters. They spent the night on high ground and were still stuck there on Monday, unable to help others until they can be rescued, or until the flood recedes enough for them to drive out.

US Army helicopters have been airlifting stranded civilians out when the weather allows them to fly. They have spent much of their time grounded, but clearing weather over the next few days should allow an increase in the number of flights.

Even though the bad weather hampered rescue operations, the Army and the Colorado and Wyoming National Guard had still managed to rescue over 700 people by air and ground as of Saturday night. By late Sunday that number had risen to more than 2,100 people and 50 pets. One of the rescue operations involved 78 children who had gotten stranded while on a field trip.

The floods have washed out many roads. Repairs in Boulder County alone will require an estimated \$150 million to repair 100 to 150 miles of roadway and 20 to 30 bridges. County Transportation Director George

Gerstle said that this amounts to 10 to 15 times the annual budget.

With flooding always come sewer problems and informal water rationing. Some towns have ordered citizens to limit water use and not to flush toilets to avoid sewer backups. In Firestone, two of the city's three water supply lines were destroyed in the flooding. So far there are no reports of water-borne illnesses.

As in previous disasters, the government is pledging that it will leave no stone unturned in its efforts to make victims whole again. President Obama signed a major disaster declaration for Colorado on Monday, and ordered a paltry \$5 million in federal aid for Boulder County. US Transportation Secretary Anthony Foxx apparently insisted to Colorado Governor John Hickenlooper that the money "was just the beginning" of federal assistance. It remains to be seen how much aid will materialize, and whether insurance companies will make timely compensation for flood damage, or if they cover it at all.

A matter of concern for area residents is that Colorado has many oil and gas wells and related surface equipment and facilities: active drilling rigs, pipelines and pipeline pumping stations, storage tanks, processing and refining plants, etc. There is concern among activist groups that the media covering the flooding is simply ignoring the growing number of reports of ruptured tanks, tanks floating downstream in floodwaters, swamped oil wells, and so on.

The *Boulder News* quoted anti-fracking activist Cliff Willmeng, who spent two days documenting such inundated and damaged sites. "It's clear that the density of the oil and gas activity there did not respect where the water would go," Willmeng said. "What we immediately need to know is what is leaking and we need a full detailed report of what that is. This is washing across agricultural land and into the waterways. Now we have to discuss what type of exposure the human population is going to have to suffer through."

The oil and gas industry claims that wells are "shut in" in anticipation of unusual weather events, that the industry prepares and drills for such events, and that 24-hour command centers are set up to monitor wells and mitigate hazards. Even so, environmental damage from leaking oil pipelines occurs regularly in the best of weather, and there is no assurance that every oil and

gas company in operation is equally assiduous in taking such preventive measures.



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