

Historic flooding in Texas and Oklahoma

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Flash flooding watches and warnings were issued across seven states, including Texas and Oklahoma, for early Tuesday morning. Massive and historically unprecedented downpours struck the city of Houston, Texas, as well as areas of Oklahoma and northern Mexico, causing flooding of streets and highways, immersion of cars and trucks, flood damage, and loss of property. Lives were also lost to the flooding across Texas and Oklahoma.

Extremely dangerous storm conditions impacted Texas, Oklahoma and other states over the weekend and overnight. Some twenty-five to thirty million residents were warned to get ready for thunderstorms, high winds, hail, lightning and tornadoes, not to mention the deadly and destructive effects of rising and rapidly moving water. There have been many drownings and disappearances as floodwaters swept away automobiles, mobile homes and, in many cases, permanent structures with unfortunate occupants trapped inside.

Already in May, parts of southeastern Oklahoma have experienced twenty inches of rain, and eighteen inches in Oklahoma City, an area that normally sees two to four inches of rain for the entire month. Dallas, Texas has had about a foot of rain and Houston, about eleven inches, in the same period.

Reports indicate that the soil is completely saturated with water across both states, which means that every extra inch of rainfall will run straight off the surface into any downhill path it can find.

Evacuations were mounted for people living in low-lying areas across the storm zone, especially river bottoms, as rivers flooded to record depths. In Wimberley, Texas, a pretty little town in the Texas Hill Country county of Hays, popular as a vacation spot and retirement community, suffered a wall of water coming down the Blanco River from the storms. The water leveled some 72 structures in the town, according to

several reports. Another report said that up to 400 homes were washed away in Hays County as the Blanco River rose from 5.5 to 40 feet in less than two hours.

Joe McComb, a former Nueces County Commissioner and a grandfather, told NBC News that his son Jonathan was found alive, two miles away from where he and his family had been staying at a vacation home. The home stood on stilts, which gave way, possibly under the impact of a fallen tree. The house began floating down the river (either Cypress Creek or the Blanco River; reports are not definitive), and hit a bridge, whence it broke into two parts, apparently separating Jonathan from his wife and daughter. Jonathan's wife was talking with her sister on her cell phone at the moment she disappeared.

In southeast Oklahoma, the National Guard was called out to rescue thirteen people who were trapped in a rental cabin.

Jonathan McComb has a collapsed lung, broken sternum, and broken ribs. He told his father Joe that he thought several times he would drown as he went underwater. Jonathan's wife, Laura, and their children Andrew, 7, and Leighton, 4, are missing. Four other residents of Wimberley are also missing.

In an earlier tragedy in the town of Devine, Medina County, Texas, a popular and well-regarded high school homecoming queen, Alyssa Ramirez, had been at a prom dance on Saturday night. She left for home in her car, but never made it. Her car was caught in the floodwaters and swept away. It ended her life.

The structural integrity of various dams has suffered under the onslaught of water. East of Austin, a dam broke under the pressure of record water levels, flooding and washing out a highway. Floodwaters rushed over the dam at Lake Texoma on the Texas-Oklahoma border. And near a dam at Lake Conroe and Willis, Montgomery County, about an hour north of

Houston on Interstate 45, people were ordered to evacuate after it became clear that there was a danger of the dam breaching or leaking from the heavy rains.

In Houston, more than 80,000 people lost electric power. The floodwaters closed Interstate Highways 10 (east-west) and 45 (southeast-northwest), along with many others.

Houston is on the wide, flat Piedmont plain that rims the Gulf of Mexico. It is a very low-lying area. Much of the southeastern quadrant of Houston, which is about 60 miles from the Gulf shore, is no more than 80 feet above sea level. This area has naturally poor drainage and thus chronic flooding problems, compounded by long-term subsidence of the under-consolidated soil.

Unfortunately, the need for assistance, as always, far exceeded the supply. This chronic inability or unwillingness for governments to come to the aid of their citizens in difficulty because of “no money” is a central part of this story. This is where the weather troubles intersect with the austerity policies of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund.

Texas’s governor, conservative Republican Greg Abbott, has declared a state of disaster for 37 Texas counties. Without this little act of subordination that only the governor of a state can make, the US federal government will not come to the aid of any US county or state in distress. Governors with reactionary political agendas can certainly increase the harm by insisting on “self-help” as a backward, idealist substitute for reasoned collective social action in the face of great danger.

In any event, the Federal Emergency Management Administration (FEMA), in response to the emergency declaration, sent federal officials to Texas to help local officials assess damage and recovery operations. So far, FEMA has performed preliminary damage assessments (PDAs) in two of the 37 counties. As of about 3 PM on Tuesday, Governor Abbott had not formally requested financial assistance from the federal government.

It will be left to Abbott and his right-wing political advisers to decide the extent to which FEMA, and the federal government generally, will be involved in ongoing recovery efforts. In what can only be described as a dismal accounting regimen, FEMA stressed that it was “too soon” to determine whether the situation in Texas will “merit” federal disaster aid.



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