

US: Mississippi River flooding threatens millions

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The National Weather Service (NWS) currently estimates that there are 17 million Americans—over 5 percent of the population—living in areas under flood warning, with worse to come. Flood waters are not expected to crest until late Wednesday in St. Louis, to be followed by record water levels and floods this week and next stretching down the length of the Mississippi River to New Orleans.

Federal officials have announced that 19 levees on the Mississippi River and its tributaries are currently in danger of being breached. The levee in West Alton, Missouri, has already been overtopped, forcing the evacuation of the St. Louis suburb's 520 residents.

The death toll from storms and flooding in the Midwest, Great Plains, and South has risen to 53. Thirteen people have died so far in Missouri, among them five international soldiers, stationed in St. Louis, whose vehicle was carried away in a torrent on Sunday. The same day, a family of five from Kentucky was killed while attempting to drive across a bridge in southern Illinois.

In the past four days, a massive swath of the Midwest has experienced rainfalls of between six inches and one foot. There have been at least 69 tornadoes this month, about three times the normal number.

The massive rain fall has driven flooding in at least 400 rivers, of which 30 are in "major flood stage," a category that includes "extensive inundation of structures and roads" necessitating "significant evacuations of people and/or transfer of property to higher elevations," according to the NWS.

The NWS and local officials are calling for evacuations in several cities, including for parts of St. Louis, which, with a population of over 2.8 million, ranks as the 19th largest US metropolitan area. The Mississippi River is expected to crest in St. Louis late on Wednesday at 43 feet.

Governor Jay Nixon has imposed a state of emergency in Missouri, which the NWS anticipates will suffer "major to historic river flooding through early next week." Illinois Governor Bruce Rauner has declared seven counties to be disaster areas.

On Wednesday officials from West Alton posted an announcement on Twitter at 11:55 a.m. telling residents to move out, but offered no further assistance: "Flooding alert: Due to the overtop of CNC levee on MS River in West Alton officials direct residents of West Alton to evacuate immediately."

Across the Mississippi River in Alton, Illinois, water levels were rapidly rising against a hastily-built sandbag barrier. An evacuation order has also been placed on portions of the St. Louis suburb of Valley Park, Missouri, where the Meramec River, at 30 feet above flood level, threatened another levee.

Flooding is also creating a catastrophe in the Ozarks, the rugged uplands of lower Missouri and upper Arkansas. "It is devastating," Rockaway Beach, Missouri mayor Don Smith told CNN. "We are begging for help." Smith said his town is "demolished."

The Mississippi will not crest in Chester, Illinois, until Friday, when it is expected to rise to 49.7 feet, barely surpassing the levels reached in the disastrous flood of 1993. Downstream in Thebes, the river is expected to surpass the record by two feet on Saturday.

From southern Illinois and Missouri, the record water volume of the Mississippi will roll southward where, in the coming days, it will meet up with heavy runoff coming from the river's southern tributaries, bringing major flooding to the cities of Memphis, Tennessee; Baton Rouge, Louisiana; and New Orleans.

Infrastructure is failing, including levees, roads, bridges, the Interstate Highway System, sewerage, and electrical grids—along with the government mechanisms ostensibly in place to protect the population: emergency and medical

services.

So far, 19 levees on the Mississippi River and its tributaries are in danger of overtopping or breaching, said Robert T. Anderson of the US Army Corps of Engineers. Once a river overtops, as has happened in West Alton, its flood waters can rapidly erode a levee, forcing a total collapse.

“If a levee was to give way, the entire Mississippi would flood out,” Kevin Roth, Weather Channel meteorologist told NBC News. “It would flood fields, homes and anything else in its path.”

Interstate 44 and Interstate 70 have been shut down in several locations, blocking the main transportation arteries into St. Louis and creating chaos in regional transportation. Hundreds of other roads, highways, and bridges have been closed in Missouri and Illinois.

With interstate roadways blocked, truck drivers “paid by the mile, were stuck with few alternatives, or were forced to travel on back roads, on hilly sections, and on roads with no shoulder, and limited passing lanes,” according to one press account.

Power outages are being reported across the region. Tonight’s temperatures in St. Louis are expected to drop to 23 degrees Fahrenheit (-5 Celsius), threatening residents with exposure and deadly icy conditions.

Raw sewage is flowing directly into rivers and streams south of St. Louis after the Monday failure of the Fenton wastewater treatment plant, which normally handles 6.75 million gallons of wastewater per day. A second sewage plant in Springfield, Missouri, also failed, sending untreated water into a nearby river.

That the flood is expected to surpass what is known as “The Great Flood of 1993” must be taken as a warning that a major social catastrophe is now unfolding. According to the National Weather Service, that event was “one of the most significant and damaging natural disasters ever to hit the United States. ... Damages totaled \$15 billion, 50 people died, hundreds of levees failed, and thousands of people were evacuated, some for months.”



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