

Death toll rises to 24 in Mississippi River floods

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Over the past four weeks at least 24 people have been killed by near-record flooding along the Mississippi River, caused by extensive storms throughout the central United States. An estimated 17 million people live in areas placed under flood warning, according to a report last week by the National Weather Service, or around 5 percent of the population of the entire country.

The surging floodwaters continued downstream over the weekend from the St. Louis area, where extensive flooding from a Mississippi River tributary inundated parts of the city's suburbs, into largely rural southern Illinois.

Residents of several small rural towns in Alexander County, the southernmost county in the state, were forced to evacuate after multiple levees were overtopped or breached last week. On Friday Len Small Levee, which protects 500 people, was overtopped by floodwaters, two days before it was expected to crest.

On Saturday morning floodwaters breached the levees in Thebes, Illinois, a small town of 436 people in the southernmost tip of the state, sending water from the Mississippi River as much as six miles inland and cutting off the towns of Miller City and Fayville, according to a local television station. No injuries were reported.

Flood levels have already reached record highs in some places, surpassing even the infamous 1993 flood, which killed 50 people and caused \$15 billion in damages. In Cape Girardeau, Missouri flood levels reached 48.86 feet on New Year's Day, surpassing the 1993 peak, and continued to rise. At least 30 homes were destroyed in the city of nearly 39,000, according to an Associated Press report.

In Thebes, flood waters reached record levels on New Years' Eve and continued to rise, cresting on Saturday at over 47 feet. The Ohio River, which also borders

Alexander County and which empties into the Mississippi River, also experienced flooding, reaching 56 feet on Sunday, 16 feet above flood stage.

At least 15 of the recorded deaths occurred in Missouri where flood waters inundated suburbs around St. Louis. Flooding reached record levels last week along the Meramec River, a tributary of the Mississippi River just south of St. Louis, flooding nearby neighborhoods and forcing the closure of major highways. Flooding on the Meramec also knocked out several water processing facilities in the St. Louis area.

On Tuesday, the Fenton Wastewater Treatment plant was taken off-line after being flooded with water from the Meramec River, resulting in raw sewage being diverted into the Mississippi River for several days. Shortly afterward the Grand Glaize Water Treatment Plant was also taken off-line after a local levee breach.

Memphis, Tennessee is the next major city in the path of the floodwaters, where the river is expected to crest on January 8. The Memphis area suffered extensive flooding and roughly \$2 billion in property damage during the last major flooding of the Mississippi River in 2011.

The floods along the Mississippi, unusual during the winter months, are due to severe storms throughout the central United States which occurred late last month, resulting in rainfalls of over six inches throughout much of the Midwest, as well as a spate of tornadoes which killed more than 40 people, including 11 in the Dallas, Texas area. The St. Louis area saw the wettest December in its history with nearly a foot of rainfall, smashing the old record of 7.82 inches.

The Mississippi River and its tributaries drain more than a third of the land area of the continental United States, meaning much of the rainfall from these storms have been funneled into the river. A similar

phenomenon occurred in 2011 when snow from record-setting blizzards the previous winter melted in the spring, resulting in large-scale flooding along the Mississippi River.

On Saturday, President Barack Obama declared a federal state of emergency in Missouri, on top of the pre-existing state of emergency declared by Missouri Governor Jay Nixon, who deployed Missouri National Guardsmen to areas impacted by flooding. In Tennessee a state of emergency declared on December 23, during the initial heavy rainstorms, remains in effect. On December 30, Governor Bobby Jindal declared a state of emergency in Louisiana, despite the fact that the state has not yet received any significant flooding.

In Louisiana, the US Army Corps of Engineers is deliberating whether to open the Bonnet Carre Spillway, which lies just upriver from New Orleans and is designed to protect the city from flooding. The last time the Spillway was opened was during the 2011 floods. In the state's capital, Baton Rouge, 80 miles upriver from New Orleans, the river is expected to crest as high as 44 feet by January 19, flooding low-lying areas outside of the levee system and significantly impacting shipping activity.

The flooding has already significantly impacted shipping and transportation infrastructure throughout the region. The Coast Guard closed 76 miles of the Mississippi River south of St. Louis to shipping traffic. The Mississippi River is one of the most important shipping thoroughfares in the country, with 60 percent of US grain exports traveling down river to ports in southern Louisiana.

An oil pipeline stretching from Oklahoma to a refinery in Illinois, a portion of which runs along the bottom of the Mississippi River, was also shut down. Amtrak passenger rail service was suspended for four days last week after high water inundated the tracks at some points along the line. Interstate highways in the St. Louis area were also closed by flooding from the Meramec, wreaking havoc on commuters traveling to work.

Numerous oil refineries also lie on or near the banks of the Mississippi River, whose operations may be impacted by the flooding. Flooding along the Mississippi river temporarily reduced US refining capacity by 2.3 million barrels per day in 2011.



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