

Flash floods kill dozens, prompt state of emergency in West Virginia

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Flooding across the state of West Virginia Thursday swept away houses, damaged bridges and roads, and killed at least fifteen people. On Friday, thousands of people remained without power, stranded by high water, and rescue crews worked to evacuate residents trapped on their roofs.

Governor Earl Ray Tomblin declared a state of emergency for 44 of the state's 55 counties on Thursday evening, after a string of torrential storms swept across the region. A detachment of 150 West Virginia National Guard was activated Friday morning to assist in rescue and recovery efforts.

Rivers and streams swelled rapidly after record rainfall. An 8-year-old boy was killed after he was pulled away in the Big Wheeling Creek. He was walking along the water's edge with his mother and sister when he slipped, according to local media reports. He was swept downstream in the high water; his body found three hours later by rescuers.

On Friday, searchers retrieved the body of a four-year-old boy who was taken by high water in Ravenswood. According to WCHS TV, the toddler jumped into the water outside his home. His grandfather jumped in after him but the current was too strong. Other rescuers spotted the little boy twice but could not reach him.

The heavy rain, rushing water and wind gusts of 60 miles per hour also caused numerous traffic accidents. On Thursday morning, trees were strewn across Interstate 64 and hydroplaning accidents forced the closure of several onramps.

In Kanawha County, where the state capital Charleston is located, local media reported several deaths. Around 4:30 p.m. Thursday, 47-year-old Melissa Hess called 911 after she became trapped in her vehicle near Wills Creek. Kanawha Sheriff Sergeant Brian Humphreys told the media that Hess

stayed on the line as water poured into her SUV; after 13 minutes, the water was halfway over her windshield. First responders were unable to navigate the flooded roads, and around 5:00 p.m. the emergency dispatcher heard screaming as the call disconnected.

Another woman died in Wills Creek after her car was swept into the high water around 1:00 a.m. An elderly man died a few miles away in Jordan Creek, where emergency responders told WSAZ News they had received hundreds of calls for help. A hospice patient died in the area when first responders were unable to reach her home.

Kanawha officials suspended many rescue efforts at nightfall Thursday, according to a *Charleston Gazette-Mail* report. Kanawha Metro 911 spokesperson Brooke Hylbert told the newspaper that the service grappled with about 30 active water rescue calls in the county at 6:00 a.m. Friday morning, most pending from the night before.

The Elk River at Queen Shoals (in Kanawha County) crested at a record 33 feet, breaking the previous record of 32 feet set in 1888. Flood stage is 19 feet. The National Weather Service in Charleston reported flooding on the Gauley, Cherry and Cranberry Rivers; the Gauley River reached an all time high of 29 feet at 10:00 p.m., but the *Gazette-Mail* reported it continued to rise after the NWS station stopped recording.

At a press conference Friday afternoon, Kanawha County officials said many emergency responders had been on the clock for more than 24 hours. "There's a lot of just utter devastation in some areas," said county deputy emergency manager C.W. Sigman after announcing that crews had just gained access to the communities of Clendenin. "The homes are gone," he said. A shelter had been opened at Shoals Elementary, although the school lacked electricity.

In some counties, power, cell phone and Internet outages have delayed rescue and assessment efforts. Appalachian Power reported at least 32,000 of its customer households cut off across the state. MonPower reported another 35,000 without electricity and Dominion Power reported 1,700 outages.

A statement from the governor's office said, "Certain portions of Greenbrier and Nicholas Counties have been rendered inaccessible because of public infrastructure damage." There are conflicting reports as to whether the Summit Lake Dam near Richwood has been breached.

In White Sulphur Springs, cell phone video showed a burning house floating away in floodwaters and striking a bridge. The house caught fire after being struck by lightning and according to a CBS reporter on the scene, "Parts of the community were still on fire Friday morning."

Flooding resulted in numerous road closures in the Charleston area. The Dunbar-South Charleston bridge, connecting the capital to South Charleston, was closed after being struck by runaway coal barges on the Kanawha River. The bridge was closed until Division of Highways inspectors ensured its structural integrity. The Nitro-St. Albans bridge and the Interstate 64 bridge near the town of Nitro were also closed due to the danger posed by loose barges overnight.

In Elkview, as many as 500 people became trapped in the Crossings Mall shopping center after its only access road washed away, leaving an enormous trench. Employees and shoppers slept in the stores or in their cars, and local media reports indicated that many people generally remained in good spirits. The shopping center's Kroger sold food and water to the stranded, but without running water or gas, restaurants were unable to function, and overflowing toilets have become a problem.

Rescuers speculated that those trapped would have to be rescued by helicopter, if they could not build a temporary bridge. "There is no time-frame for a solution at this point," WSAZ reported Friday.



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