

Tens of thousands evacuated from floods in Northern California

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Heavy rains hit Northern California early this week, leading to floods, mudslides, and the evacuations of as many as 50,000 people. At least eight people have died as a result, exposing the inadequacy of California's infrastructure. There is another heavy storm expected this weekend.

The Coyote Creek in San Jose reached a 100-year high following the recent storms. 14,000 people living nearby were placed under an emergency evacuation order and were unable to return to their homes Wednesday. An additional 36,000 people were issued an evacuation advisory. As floodwaters receded the number of mandatory evacuations dropped to 3,800 on Friday.

Emergency shelters have been opened for people while firefighters had to go door-to-door to warn residents to leave, as there are no warning sirens or other methods of contacting people. As floodwaters rose rapidly, rescue workers had to transport people on inflatable rafts. At least 300 homes have been damaged and total damages are estimated at several million dollars.

Despite last week's near-disaster at Oroville Dam, the local governments in major cities like San Jose, the third largest in California, remained unprepared, giving residents little to no warning. The San Jose evacuation orders were enacted only after floodwaters were already chest-high in some areas. Mayor Sam Liccardo, stated, "As I sit here today and I look out at a neighborhood that's completely inundated with water ... there's no question in my mind there was a failure of some kind."

As with the recent evacuations of residents living near the Oroville Dam, those most affected are largely workers or people living in poverty. One hundred families living in mobile homes in Lake County were also ordered to leave. "It's very serious," Lake County Sheriff Brian Martin stated Monday night. "There's going to be widespread property damage. .. our ground's been saturated."

Some areas of North California received as much as eight inches of rain. Recalling the recent experience at Oroville, the nearby Don Pedro Dam opened its spillway for the first time in twenty years. This could triple the flow of the Tuolumne River going through Stanislaus and Modesto counties where authorities were again forced to go door-to-door to warn residents of potential flooding.

While Lake Oroville appeared capable of handling the additional water and runoff, infrastructure in other parts of the state failed.

A levee broke along the San Joaquin River Monday, forcing the evacuation of 500 people near Manteca in San Joaquin County. "Work crews have made impressive progress on filling in the levee gap, and reducing the flow of water," said the county's Office of Emergency Services. "Crews will stay on the scene to further stabilize the levee to completely seal the opening."

However, the release of water from the Don Pedro reservoir will put further strain on the levees in the area. The San Joaquin River peaked on Thursday, but the reservoir will continue releasing water for at least a week. "We're just barely hanging on by a thread down here," said Chris Neudeck, a levee engineer. He went on to state that the additional water would put further strain on other levees, threatening to collapse rather than overflow them.

As was highlighted last week, dam conditions around the country are dangerously deficient, earning a D grade from the American Society of Civil Engineers (ASCE) in 2013. California has 833 high-hazard potential dams, those whose collapse would threaten lives. The average percentage of high-hazard dams is 17 percent nationally, but for California it is 52 percent. A full 300 of California's high-hazard dams have no emergency action plan.

Levees, to which the ASCE gave a D minus grade in 2013, are in a similar state. There are 100,000 miles of levees running throughout all 50 states in the United

States. The ASCE report stated that the reliability of many of those levees is unknown. Many of them were built in the 19th century and were designed to protect farmland, not towns and cities. They also decay over time. The ASCE estimate that \$100 billion would be needed to repair all the levees around the country, less than a sixth of the Pentagon's budget this year.

The US Government Accountability Office (GAO) reported in July 2016 that the US Army Corps of Engineers and the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) had made little progress on implementing important levee safety activities required by the Water Resources Reform and Development Act of 2014, only beginning to put together a national levee inventory. "However," the GAO states, "the agencies have no plan for implementing the remaining activities required by the act." These include "multifaceted levee safety initiatives" and reconvening the national committee on levee safety.

Within California's Central Valley, there are 1,600 miles of levees, but fewer than half of them qualify for repairs through the US Army Corps of Engineers. Most are privately maintained by farmers.

While it is unclear how many people live near and are protected by levees, FEMA estimates that 43 percent of the US population lives in counties with levees. The issue of levee safety and the destruction that can be wrought when they fail was driven into people's minds following Hurricane Katrina in 2005, when 1,836 people were killed, mostly as a result of failing levees.

Even when catastrophe is averted, the impact on workers' lives is immense. Few can afford to uproot their lives at a moment's notice, sacrificing wages or even their jobs when they are forced to evacuate. Each natural disaster is dealt with under capitalism as it comes, with little planning or foresight by government officials.



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