

Historic flooding across US Midwest leaves thousands homeless, four dead

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Thousands of people have been forced to flee their homes as communities throughout the US Midwest experience historic flooding events. States of emergency have been declared in four states, Nebraska, Iowa, Wisconsin and South Dakota. As of this writing, four people have died, while thousands remain in emergency shelters or trapped in their homes, surrounded by water.

Seventy out of 99 counties in Nebraska are under state-issued emergency declarations, as are 41 of Iowa's 99 counties. In both states, melting snow, ice jams, and falling rain have engorged river systems with rushing water that has overwhelmed insufficient levee systems and destroyed outdated dams.

The flooding, which began last week, but was predicted weeks in advance, will continue throughout the week and into spring, as snow and ice melts while rain continues to fall. According to the National Weather Service, flooding has impacted approximately 9 million people in 14 states.

A record-setting winter snowfall season followed by last week's "bomb cyclone," which brought high winds and heavy snow across the Midwest, in conjunction with warming temperatures, proved to be a deadly combination that has overwhelmed neglected infrastructure and transportation systems.

The latest environmental and social crisis, exacerbated by climate change, will have devastating effects on local farming economies. Meteorologists have documented a 15 and 20 percent increase in rainfall in the Upper Midwest in recent decades. The frequency of high impact rainfall has nearly doubled in the same timeframe. The message is clear: just as hurricanes and tropical storms have increased in intensity, flooding events in the Midwest are expected to increase as well.

Flooding events in the United States will increase food prices on a global scale. The Midwest and Great Plains states, including Nebraska, Iowa, Wisconsin, North and South Dakota and Minnesota, contain some of the most productive and valuable agricultural land in the country. In Nebraska early estimates place the economic losses to farmers from the current flooding, primarily centered on corn and livestock, at over \$1 billion, with that number expected to rise.

The flooding along the Missouri and Mississippi flood plains has compromised approximately 210 miles of the federal levee system in four states, making travel arduous or impossible for residents seeking to find shelter or return home and assess damages. In addition to overflowing levees, at least two dams have been compromised. The Spencer Dam, located on the Niobrara River in Nebraska, was destroyed last week, leading to at least one fatality.

Vice President Mike Pence conducted a flyby of the submerged Nebraska plains and briefly stopped in Omaha for photo opportunities with local government officials on Tuesday. Pence assured those in attendance that once he returned to Washington, D.C. federal disaster declarations would be "expedited."

Despite Pence's rehearsed remarks workers can be assured that whatever funds are made available after the fact will be severely lacking and difficult to access, while lucrative rebuilding contracts will be made available to campaign contributors and connected business interests.

The flooding has been particularly devastating to rural farmers in the affected area, many of whom were already teetering on financial ruin. Bankruptcy among farmers rose by 19 percent across the region in 2018, including in Nebraska, Iowa and Wisconsin. Dairy farmers, already in a precarious financial situation as

milk prices continue drop due to escalating trade war tariffs between the United States and China, have been forced to dump thousands of gallons of milk, with some farmers forced to quit the industry all together.

Farms that haven't been inundated with floods aren't safe from the effects of the deluge. Vital rail and road infrastructure used to transport feed, grain and livestock has been washed away, isolating the farmers from local and global markets. In Nebraska, over 40 state and federal highways remain closed due to flooding. In some cases National Guard troops have been airlifting in hay and feed to prevent a mass culling of livestock. Even so, farmers are reporting massive losses as thousands of animals have either been trapped in overflowing barns or swept away by rushing water.

The Army of Corps of Engineers has warned that flooding will continue and that a "majority of the federal levee systems" are "compromised ... along the Missouri River from the confluence of the Platte River to Rulo, Nebraska."

In 2011, following a major flood that breached a two-mile-long levee in Hamburg, Iowa, residents took matters into their own hands and raised the height of the levee to prevent future flooding. Federal officials however, intervened against this act of self-preservation and ordered the locals to reduce the size of the levee to pre-flood levels unless they were willing to make an additional \$5.5 million in improvements. This proved to be too costly for the small town so the levee was lowered.

Hamburg residents such as Lana Brandt, 70, are flummoxed as to the government's intentions, now that Hamburg, eight years later, is once again under water.

"The government made us tear the top off of the levee and bring it down to stump size...and so the water's rushing over the levee now," Brandt told *The Daily Nonpareil*. "Whereas, if we had been able to keep that levee, we might have been able to keep our community dry, and we wouldn't lose businesses and property and crops. This is huge."

While workers and farmers are forced to pack sandbags and erect dirt berms in order to protect their lives and homes, the federal government is flying in hundreds of feet of retaining walls to protect military assets located at Offutt Air Force Base in Nebraska. A 740 foot-long, four-foot-tall system of barriers was flown in from Louisiana to the base overnight on

Sunday to protect flight simulators from being flooded.

The long-term effects of the massive cleanup that will be required will include innumerable environmental impacts on farmers and communities. Waterlogged fields will need to be dried before spring planting can begin, lest fields rot, mold over or fail entirely. The flooding has produced a dangerous concoction of industrial chemicals and pesticides that has covered hundreds of miles of farmland and seeped into the walls of homes, schools and businesses.

"The water is chock-full of stuff. This is a toxic brew that is going down the river—the water took out gas stations and farm shops and fuel barrels," John Hansen, president of the Nebraska Farmers Union, told the *Washington Post*.

Once the waters begin to recede, workers and farmers will be left to pick up the pieces on their own. Thousands of people who couldn't afford flood insurance will continue the American tradition of appealing to their fellow workers on websites such as GoFundMe.com for the funds and supplies necessary to survive once Red Cross shelters close and token government assistance shrivels up.

With each successive natural disaster American capitalism reveals itself incapable of and unwilling to mitigate the impact on the working class. The systematic negligence of vital infrastructure is another expression of class exploitation in the United States. Only through the reorganization of society on a scientific socialist perspective, organized for human need rather than private profit, will future climate disasters be mitigated and unnecessary loss of life be stopped.

Click here for graphs detailing increase in water precipitation in Midwest.



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