

# Nine months after devastating flooding, Central Michigan residents are left abandoned

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It has now been nearly nine months since the breaching of the Sanford, Smallwood, and Edenville dams and subsequent dike failures along the Tittabawassee River in Central Michigan. Boyce Hydro LLC was the private owner of these dams and was responsible for the state of disrepair that led to their breaching in May.

State authorities were intimately aware of the decaying and dangerous state of the dam, as shown through decades of safety violations and the revocation of Boyce's electric production license by the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission in 2018. Even so, they chose to do nothing to prevent a disaster. The WSWs has published extensive reports detailing the events of the flooding, its effects, and its aftermath.

The floods initially displaced over 10,000 residents, affected over 4,000 homes, wiped out or damaged numerous bridges and roads, drained Wixom and Sanford Lakes, creating roughly \$190 million in damage to businesses and an additional \$55 million in infrastructural damage. Low water levels in the drained lakes resulted in rampant plant growth on the exposed lake-bed, with poplar trees growing at especially alarming rates. If not removed soon, the tightly clustered trees could be roughly 15–20-feet tall by 2023, the year slated for the completion of all upgrades and repairs for the dams.

Families and small businesses impacted by the flooding face immediate safety and financial concerns. Most residents in the flooded areas do not have flood insurance and have not received any assistance on this front. Some Midland city residents not directly hit by the flooding experienced sewage and storm-drain backup.

The village of Sanford is in ruins. Floodwaters inundated the town of 850, leaving its business center demolished, its residents financially crushed by mortifying rebuilding costs and personal property losses, and its lake-reliant local economy gutted. While various local media sources have tried to paint over the misery during the holiday season, many residents have left the town with what little they can bring with them. There is no certainty that the village will ever be able to recover from this disaster.

Residents who lost their homes and chose to stay now face living out of motels, RVs, campers, or whatever section of their home is still livable. The winter months and rising levels of COVID-19 compound the dangers.

Areas directly around the drained lakes are not faring well either. With the absence of water, shorelines, where 6,000 formerly lake-front properties are located, are in the process of eroding. These properties, valued at \$800 million, will remain at risk of encroaching instability, which could place more families at risk until clean-up and rebuilding efforts halt erosion. The fallout of the flooding has already resulted in property values falling and the crippling of local economies reliant on the lake.

Neighboring Gladwin County is experiencing a water crisis due to the fall in water levels. More than 300 wells were losing water pressure in July; as of mid-October, the number has almost doubled to nearly 600 wells. Some fire hydrants fed by Secord Lake are losing pressure. Secord is another lake created by the dam system along the Tittabawassee River, which has experienced dropping water levels since the dam failures.

In an interview with the local ABC12 News, Gladwin

County Commissioner Joel Vernier explained that firefighters must now go an hour out of their way to get water from Gladwin city's fire hall. In Secord Township, the fire hall has since drilled a new capped well to circumvent the problem.

Hundreds of affected Gladwin County residents also face the prospect of having to rework their own water wells due to the lower groundwater levels, at the cost of thousands of dollars apiece. Those who can't afford this must resort to bottled water.

Many areas directly covered by the floodwaters remained choked with debris. The pollution can range from various bits of trash picked up by the water flow to boats and jet skis with fuel in them—or leaking out—and pieces of docks ripped off the shorelines.

To make matters worse, the scale of contamination from the Dow Chemical Superfund site, which is located along the Tittabawassee River, is still unknown. The site was submerged in floodwaters, which rushed into the chemical company's containment ponds, causing them to overflow.

These ponds are chemical run-off holding area, a former Dow employee confirmed to the WWS. A large cement trench runs through the entire Midland complex, collecting any run-off when it rains, feeding everything into these ponds. Given this design, virtually anything on the complex's ground floor, most prevalently Dioxin (a dangerous and common byproduct of Dow's regular chemical productions) and Dursban (a pesticide tied to neurological development issues in exposed children), could be swept into the containment ponds and released into the surrounding area during the flood.

Dow claimed in a statement a statement days after the flooding that nothing had leaked during the flooding. However, the only testing after the floods, conducted by the state Department of Environment, Great Lakes, and Energy (EGLE) of Michigan, excluded Dow's manufacturing areas, containment ponds, or Superfund riverbanks. However, it showed low Dioxin contamination downstream of the Superfund site.

In June, the Trump administration declared the mid-Michigan area impacted by the flooding to be a major disaster area, allowing for up to \$43 million of federal relief aid to be distributed through the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), the Small Business Administration, and the US Department of

Agriculture. This is only a fraction of the estimated \$250 million in rebuilding costs.

Since the initial "relief," state and federal governments have virtually abandoned the "major disaster area." The only action was the extension of the FEMA application deadline from the beginning to the end of September.

Residents and county and Sanford village officials have resorted to a GoFundMe to supplement public funds for relief and rebuilding efforts, according to Mlive.com.

As for the plans to rebuild the dams, the nonprofit Four Lakes Task Force, per the settlement of the condemnation lawsuit against Boyce Hydro LLC, is taking over the Edenville and Smallwood dams, as well as two others in Boyce Hydro's possession. The task force has to pay \$1.576 million—\$270,000 going to Boyce Hydro, \$152,000 to local suppliers with liens on Boyce properties, and \$1.154 million to the US Bankruptcy Court for the Eastern District of Michigan in Bay City, which will decide its distribution—to gain control of the properties.

The Four Lakes Task Force described the deal as "the best deal we could get to allow the community to extract itself from the legacy of Boyce's ownership and move forward." Boyce Hydro is currently filing for chapter 11 bankruptcy protection.

Local residents are being forced to foot the bill for the task force's operations through a "\$350 special assessment on property owners along the lakes, with an \$88 fee for nearby property owners off the lake, that will start beginning on winter 2021 tax bills," according to the *Detroit Free Press*. The task force estimates it will cost local property owners roughly \$1,500–\$2,400 in assessment fees annually for the next four decades.



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