

Hard-hit New Jersey struggles to recover from Ida's devastation

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New Jersey is struggling to recover from the impact of the remnants of Hurricane Ida earlier this month which caused the deaths of 29 residents. The bodies of Seton Hall University students Nidhi Rana and Ayush Rana were recovered this week. The two Passaic, New Jersey residents had been swept away after their car was overwhelmed by flood waters. Two people remain missing nearly two weeks after the storm hit.

Ida brought massive floods that destroyed homes and small businesses across the Northeastern United States, in addition to Louisiana, where the hurricane made landfall, knocking out power for one million people and killing 31.

Many are wondering how they will put their lives back together. "I hope they understand the devastation that this community is suffering right now, I really do, because nobody is answering telephones, and it's really hard," Ms. Mann, a resident of Millburn, told NJ Spotlight News as she fought back tears. "So much help is needed, I don't even know what to ask for. Do you understand?"

On September 6, President Joe Biden declared Bergen, Gloucester, Hunterdon, Middlesex, Passaic and Somerset counties major disaster areas. This designation enables the storm's victims to seek federal assistance for rebuilding.

On the following day, Biden toured hard-hit areas of New Jersey with Governor Phil Murphy, who argued that Essex, Union, Hudson and Mercer counties also should be declared major disaster areas. In addition, federal and state officials are evaluating whether Burlington, Monmouth, Morris and Warren counties meet requirements for this designation.

This long list, which includes 14 of New Jersey's 21 counties, gives an initial sense of the magnitude of Ida's effect on the state. These counties are home to

approximately 7.4 million, or 83 percent, of the state's 8.9 million residents.

Manville, which Biden and Murphy toured, had some of the worst flood damage in the state. The predominantly working-class town is home to about 10,000 people. Manville has a large community of Eastern European immigrants, including one of the largest Polish populations in the state. Many immigrants from Latin America have come to the town in recent years.

"We lost everything," resident Kurt Jelenek told CBS2. "Our cars are under water. What we are wearing right now is what we have. We lost our animals, which drowned, and you just can't imagine the loss." He added that the floodwaters rose from his ankles to his shoulders within minutes.

Residents have been frustrated by their efforts to interact with the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). Jelenek said that the agency's website was not working, and no one had told him what assistance he would receive.

"We don't even know where to start," resident Robert Moskal told CBS2. "We get on the phone with FEMA: 120-minute wait time." Storm-damaged and moldy belongings have waited at the curbside to be picked up and removed.

In addition to the flooding, two buildings exploded in Manville in the aftermath of the storm. One was a home, and the other a business called Saffron Banquets. The explosions may have been caused by gas leaks resulting from the flooding.

Manville, which was named after the asbestos manufacturing company Johns Manville, is an emblem of capitalist contempt for the working class. For years, white flakes of asbestos, a carcinogen, floated through town. Creosote, another toxin, was dumped into

lagoons on which unknowing residents ice skated. The groundwater and drinking water became contaminated, and a section of town later was named a Superfund site, designated by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

Residents have struggled with flooding for decades without any significant help from the state or the federal governments. A high-profile example is Hurricane Floyd, which struck Manville hard in 1999. But an Army Corps of Engineers study concluded in 2016 that Manville did not meet the cost-benefit standard for any flood protection project.

Millburn, a suburb of Newark in northern New Jersey, also experienced serious flooding during Ida's onslaught. Water surged through its downtown area as the storm passed through. Resident Neeraj Nagpal lost the contents of three of the four floors of his house. Jeff Cassin, another resident, told NJ Spotlight News that hundreds of households in town had been affected. But Millburn is in Essex County, which FEMA has not declared a major disaster area as of this writing.

The remnants of Hurricane Ida also damaged the aqueduct that provides water to Hoboken and Jersey City, which are across the Hudson River from New York City. A boil water advisory that went into effect 24 hours afterward remained in place for four days. Residents are angry at Suez Water, the company that owns the aqueduct, because it was slow to begin repairs.

Responding to public anger, local politicians have made a show of expressing outrage. Jersey City Mayor Steven M. Fulop criticized Suez's distribution of fresh and bottled water to residents as chaotic. Hoboken Mayor Ravi Bhalla has demanded an apology and an explanation from the company. Hoboken and Jersey City are in Hudson County, which has also not been declared a major disaster area as of this writing.

Flooding was not the only catastrophe brought by Ida. The storm spawned a tornado that passed through Mullica Hill, a town in southern New Jersey that is approximately 25 miles south of Philadelphia. The tornado was a Category 3 on the Enhanced Fujita Scale, which indicates winds of 136 to 165 mph and severe damage.

"Our entire property was destroyed," resident Jennifer Culling told NJ Spotlight News. Water flooded her basement. The tornado tore off part of her roof and

destroyed her shed, garage, cars, fence and several windows. Almost every tree on her property was knocked down. Elsewhere in town, roofs and even entire sides of houses were torn off. Residents reported never having seen destruction on this scale.

During his tour, Biden pledged federal assistance to the ravaged state and promoted his infrastructure plan. But the plan, which would provide about \$579 billion in new infrastructure spending, is not adequate to address the needs created by decades of neglect and austerity.

The sewage and storm water networks in many parts of the state are more than 100 years old. The state will need \$8.6 billion to address its drinking water needs over the next 20 years, according to the American Society of Civil Engineers. New Jersey's wastewater needs a total of \$17.5 billion. The state has 229 high-hazard dams. In addition, 7.8 percent of its bridges are structurally deficient, and 37 percent of the roads are in poor condition.

The effects of Hurricane Ida were exacerbated by man-made climate change, a clear and present danger that Biden was forced to acknowledge in his remarks. But Biden, like his Republican and Democratic predecessors, offered platitudes instead of the massive investments and international scientific coordination that the fight against climate change requires. The inability of Biden and Murphy to address the grave challenges facing New Jersey and the nation reflect their role as long-standing agents of the financial elite and enemies of the working class.



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