December tornadoes cut swath of devastation through southeastern Missouri

Cole Michaels
30 December 2021

The deadly storms that hit the US states of Arkansas, Illinois, Indiana, Kentucky, Mississippi, Missouri, Ohio and Tennessee on Friday, December 10 have exposed state and federal governments' criminal lack of planning for major disasters. Ninety people have been confirmed killed by the storms, including eight workers at Mayfield Consumer Products in Mayfield, Kentucky and six Amazon workers at an Edwardsville, Illinois fulfillment center outside St. Louis, Missouri. FEMA administrator Deanne Criswell admitted what is already apparent, that increases in the number and severity of major storms in the United States are the "new normal."

Five tornadoes were recorded in Missouri, ranging from EF-0 (40-72mph winds) to EF-2 (113-157mph winds) in strength in Montgomery, Reynolds, Stone and Webster/Wright Counties. In far southern Missouri near Caruthersville, nine-year-old Annistyn Rackley died as she and her two sisters hid in their parents' bathtub. Trey and Meghan Rackley texted a photo of their children to their aunt that went viral on social media after the storm. Fifteen minutes after sending the photo, a tornado demolished the home, throwing the family dozens of yards through the air onto a field. First responders found the family, including Annistyn, lying in the mud. Annistyn's seven-year-old sister Avalinn told doctors, "I was flying around in the tornado and I prayed to Jesus to take care of me, and he spit me out — and the tornado spit me out into the mud."

Missouri Governor Mike Parson activated the State Emergency Operations Center on December 10. At the peak of the damage 30,000 Missouri residents were without power, according to power company Ameren.

After the December 10 storms came warnings of another severe weather pattern in the Midwest on Wednesday, December 15. Severe weather, including the chance of winds above 100 mph and tornadoes, were predicted for an area including portions of Iowa, Kansas, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska and Wisconsin. That day brought wind gusts of over 40 mph throughout Missouri, flipping over a truck while driving down a road in Springfield.

On Thursday, December 16, Parson announced that the state will apply for disaster aid from the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) to fix "extensive damage to public infrastructure, homes, businesses, and electric power delivery systems." Surveys found that the worst damage to electric cooperatives infrastructure was in the far southeastern counties of Dunklin and Pemiscot—over 20 large transmission towers and power lines received heavy damage or were destroyed.

The storms were triggered by unusually warm weather in the days preceding December 10. Multiple spots in the Midwest and Midsouth reported temperatures in the 60s and 70s Fahrenheit. The temperatures, combined with a La Niña weather pattern, led to the formation of severe thunderstorms and tornadoes. Scientists reported that the tornadoes had an extremely unusually long hold on their intensity. Tornadoes normally rapidly lose strength, within minutes, while these tornadoes took several hours to begin dying down. The storm as a whole moved at 80 mph (50km) an hour.

As the storms began to hit the Midwest, cell phones throughout the region went off when the National Weather Service (NWS) issued a warning over a wide swath of the area. NWS employee Jim Sieveking said, "We were issuing large tornado warnings because it was only a matter of time before one of them spun up into a tornado."

The storms brought devastating damage in portions of Missouri. A tornado that hit St. Charles County sent three people to the hospital with injuries; one, 84-year-old Ollie Borgmann, later died. The woman and her husband, Vernon, were in their home when the tornado demolished it. The winds blew the couple to a field one hundred yards away from their house, the location where first responders found them.

The tornado also hit the towns of Defiance and New Melle, 40 minutes west of downtown St. Louis. It was measured to be at least EF-3 in strength, meaning it had 58 to 206 mph (254 to 332 km/h) winds and a path length of 21 miles. The main local highway, Highway F, was completely impassable after the storm due to debris, and at least two

© World Socialist Web Site

homes had their roofs entirely blown off. KMOV News 4 reporter Caroline Hecker was in the area when the storms hit. According to her, she saw two homes blown off their foundations. The tornado damaged 20 cars as it traveled its path and crossed Interstate 64.

Rich and Marsha Vance were neighbors of the Borgmanns. Their home was destroyed in the storm as they hid in their basement. Rich told KMOV, "Basically, it sounded like a truck or train was going through our house. We were probably down there five minutes—ten minutes at the most. We looked up, and I said, 'there's no house up there anymore.'"

Tony Frisella, the manager of Frisella Nursery in Defiance, explained to Fox2Now, "I mean, the amount of trees that were split like toothpicks is insane." It was a struggle for him and helpers to clear a path to his business. "It took us about two hours to even get enough trees cleared to get to this area. And I mean, never seen anything like this."

Defiance resident Allison Laupp talked to KSDK News of how she, her husband and their three children hid as the storms hit. She is currently pregnant and expecting a girl. Laupp recalled their harrowing experience hiding in their basement. "I heard the tornado, which is when we huddled together in the corner. We got down in a tight circle moments before impact. It was absolutely terrifying." While their ceiling and trusses collapsed, the family was physically unharmed.

Neighbor Kathleen Flynn lost her home entirely. She told KSDK that initially her family was not hiding, but a gut feeling told them to head for the basement. "It felt like the movie 'Twister,'" Flynn said. "Cellar door flying open, we watched the 4-wheeler fly by. We huddled in the corner and tried to calm down our 8-year-old. A bunch of big tree limbs fell onto the cellar door, so my husband had to move them out of the way and then pull my daughter, myself and our dog out."

The tornado demolished a barn that was housing five horses, killing two and injuring three, who were shipped to a veterinary hospital. The barn owner had non-life threatening injuries. Another tornado passed near a National Weather Service station in Weldon Spring, also in St. Charles County. The employees at the station were forced to take shelter.

Ameren power crews worked to restore power to the area immediately the morning after the storm. St. Charles County Executive Steve Ehlmann explained, "We want to thank Ameren and Cuivre River for getting out here. The only thing holding us back Friday night was power lines blocking the road. We really couldn't send our people out to start clearing the roads until they got here, and they responded." Commenting on the destroyed houses in Defiance, Ehlmann said, "When the sirens go off, go to your basement. Because that's all that's left of this house is the basement." St. Charles County Regional Emergency Management Director Chris Hunt said, "I've talked to residents down here who said when they got those alerts on the phones or when they heard the sirens, they went to their basement, they sought shelter, and I'm confident it saved lives."

Local officials estimate that up to ten houses in and around Defiance were destroyed, and over 25 homes were severely damaged. St. Charles County put out a call from assistance from charitable organizations; those who answered the call include AmeriCorps, the America Red Cross and the Salvation Army.

The official St. Charles County Facebook page reported that the storms caused over $3.4 million in damage. The county government set up a Multi-Agency Resource Center (MARC) to serve as a local hub for local and state organizations and charities to provide assistance to victims. Counseling services were also offered.

After the storms St. Charles County officials took stock of the situation and the county's response. "One of the biggest challenges that we had last night (were) the utility lines," said Chris Hunt, St. Charles County Police captain and director of St. Charles County Regional Emergency Management. "They were over the road. They limited our ability to get to some of these folks that needed some assistance." Local building code officials are inspecting homes to notify residents if they are habitable or not. According to St. Charles County Executive Ehlmann, there were injuries after a previous tornado when residents entered unstable buildings. "We really hope everybody appreciates that fact and will respect that we're doing that to protect them from injuries that might occur due to damage to the home, and that's an important part of the next phase," Ehlmann said on that topic.

There has been a large outpouring of support from individuals and charities in the storm's aftermath. Within three days the New Melle Fire Protection District had to turn away physical donations. "We are overwhelmed with the outpouring of support shown by the community," the District posted on its Facebook page. As the storm hit they posted that, "There was very little warning of what was to come."

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site