

“These were coal mining towns and people were struggling before the floods”

Governor says full death toll from eastern Kentucky flooding will not be known for weeks

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At least 28 people have been confirmed dead as of Sunday due to the historic flooding that hit eastern Kentucky late last week. Far more victims are expected to be found as search-and-rescue teams waded through debris-laden flood waters, mudslides and wrecked homes and buildings in the mostly isolated rural and coal mining towns.

National Guard units from Kentucky, Tennessee and West Virginia have made more than 660 air rescues, and there have been over 600 water rescues, Kentucky Governor Andy Beshear told CNN. But there could be “many more deaths,” he said, and it could be weeks before the full death toll is known. “There are still so many people unaccounted for. And in this area, it’s going to be a hard task to get a firm number of folks unaccounted for,” Beshear told CNN.

Many areas are unreachable, with 50 bridges washed away in Perry County alone. The lack of power and cell phone service has also hindered the teams who are working frantically to save more people with hot temperatures and more showers and thunderstorms expected over the next several days. This could lead to “additional river flooding,” the National Weather Service in Jackson, Kentucky warned. Over 10,000 customers were still without power in the state as of Sunday, according to Kentucky Power. Residents and at least one hospital in the area also have no clean water to drink or to flush away waste.

The devastation and fatalities are centered in Knott, Breathitt, Clay, Letcher, Leslie and Perry counties.

Among the dead are at least four children. The bodies of Maddison Noble, 8, Riley Noble Jr., 6; Chance Noble, 2, and Nevaeh Noble, 4, were found Friday after the children were swept away from their parents in floodwaters in Knott County.

There are currently just 15 emergency shelters that are active. Many displaced residents are sleeping in their cars and trucks. The Federal Emergency Management Agency is only providing the state with 18 tractor-trailer truckloads of water, according to the governor.

“This is the most devastating thing that ever happened to this area,” Gary Michael Hunt, a disabled coal miner from Martin County, told the *World Socialist Web Site*. “Lots of people live in mobile homes, and they were absolutely destroyed. It looks like someone dammed up a river and whole hollows are under water. Families have multiple losses and many of the dead might never be found.”

Martin County was largely spared, Hunt said, but adjacent Pike County was not. “People are giving everything they got to help each other. But these are coal mining towns, and they were struggling before the floods. Now they have nothing.”

“It’s kind of like a war zone here,” said Frances Everage, a resident of Hazard in hard-hit Perry County. Everage told CNN reporters she had “never seen anything like” the flooding in her 44 years in Hazard. Her friends lost their farms completely, including crops, barns and equipment, she said, adding, “When

you put your blood, sweat and tears into something and then see it ripped away in front of your eyes, there's going to be a grieving process. This community will rebuild, and we will be OK, but the impact on mental health is going to be significant."

The record floods "couldn't have come at a worse time," Doug Holliday, a 73-year-old attorney in Hazard who represents miners with black lung disease and other health problems, told the Associated Press. "The coal business has been petering out and a lot of people have left," Holliday said. "The people who are left live paycheck-to-paycheck or on Social Security, and most of them live in mobile homes on the very edge of the economy." Holliday thinks an old friend died in one of those mobile homes, which was swept away by floodwaters and hasn't been seen since, the AP wrote.

The hardest-hit counties received between 8 and 10 1/2 inches (20-27 centimeters) of rain over 48 hours. In addition to climate change increasing the frequency and severity of devastating weather events, the environmentally destructive practices of the coal companies also likely contributed to the rivers and creeks cresting at record levels.

"Decades upon decades of strip mining and mountaintop-removal mining leave the land unable to help absorb some of that runoff during periods of high rainfall," Emily Satterwhite, director of Appalachian Studies at Virginia Tech, told the Associated Press.

Just last month, flooding devastated former coal mining regions in southwestern Virginia, across from the West Virginia counties of McDowell and Mingo.

Seven of the nation's 100 poorest counties are in eastern Kentucky. Flood-devastated Clay County, which is 94 percent white, has a per capita income of \$15,905. This compares to a US per capita income of \$53,504.

The region was once a stronghold of the United Mine Workers, known for militant battles from "Bloody Harlan County War" of the 1930s, to the Brookside strike in 1973 and AT Massey strike in 1984-85. But decades of UMWA betrayals and collusion with the coal bosses have left the region destitute. Coal production has fallen by 90 percent since 1990, according to state figures.

"There are no jobs around here," Hunt told the WSWS. "My wife's an RN (Registered Nurse) and I'm disabled. We're struggling. If you work, you're

getting dimes on a dollar. Most of the mining jobs are gone. There are a few gas station jobs but they pay the minimum wage. [Former coal operator] Jim Booth auctioned off his mines but he ain't broke. He lives in a mansion."

Hunt was assaulted and handcuffed by a Kentucky state trooper at a public hearing of the Martin County water department in 2018 for demanding clean and safe water for the area's residents. He said residents were still battling. "We have the highest rates in the state, the water lines are still breaking down and they're still not replacing it. We got to stand up to all of this. That's what it's going to take."



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