

Torrential downpour produces flash flooding in parts of Rhode Island, shutting down interstate highway

Kate Randall
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More rain was forecast for Tuesday and Wednesday after heavy rain inundated parts of Rhode Island on Labor Day Monday. Drivers were stuck in traffic on Interstate 95 Monday for more than two hours before it reopened in both directions. Route 10 also became completely blocked by the floodwaters.

About 600 households reported power outages. An unoccupied building collapsed in Providence, Brown University students had to evacuate a dorm after the flooding of the first floor, and at least one rescue was made as a driver tried to navigate a flooded street.

Authorities pointed to climate change and decaying infrastructure as contributing factors to the torrential downpour and its effect on the coastal New England state. A flood watch remained in effect until 5 p.m. Tuesday for most of Rhode Island and Massachusetts.

Gov. Daniel McKee warned at a press conference on Monday that more rain was coming after over four inches of rain fell on Providence and surrounding areas over a short period of time. Steady rain was forecast through Tuesday and into Wednesday and McKee urged motorists to stay off the roads.

The director of the Rhode Island Department of Transportation, Peter Alviti, said that closures were due to overwhelmed drainage systems. He explained that although department crews had been checking for blockages in the drainage system before the storm, “It was simply that the rain came down at an intensity that exceeded its capacity to accept it.”

Flood warnings were in effect in parts of Rhode Island and Massachusetts on Tuesday as the weather system remained in the area. The National Weather Service said the heaviest rain total was in Cranston, Rhode Island, measuring 10.83 inches, excluding any

rain on Tuesday or Wednesday. NWS meteorologist Torry Gaucher told the *Boston Globe* Monday, “We were seeing rainfall rates of three inches an hour, which caused that deluge in Providence.”

Rhode Island rain totals for Monday included Providence (with 8.31 inches), Smithfield (7.95 inches) and North Providence (7.28 inches). Douglas, in Worcester County, Massachusetts, received the most rain in the state by Monday evening (4.10 inches).

Gaucher said that flooding would continue Tuesday in low-lying areas where storm drains are clogged, along with small creeks, streams and rivers in both Rhode Island and Massachusetts. Dangerous conditions were predicted for northern Rhode Island, including Kent and Providence counties through Tuesday morning.

The Drought Monitor of the National Drought Mitigation Center of the University of Nebraska-Lincoln shows Massachusetts and Rhode Island as suffering through extreme drought conditions, with parts of the two states suffering a D3, or extreme drought, score.

“This is definitely much needed and beneficial rain to help us kind of dig out of the drought,” Gaucher told the *Globe*. He added, however, that for trees and vegetation stressed by the lack of water during the summer it may have come too late. “These things are kind of irreversible at this point,” he said.

Providence resident Rodolfo Flores told local television channel WPRI that on Monday afternoon he was awakened from a nap by people screaming outside his Pleasant Valley Parkway home. He looked out the window to see a car more than halfway submerged in floodwaters.

Flores said that the driver was still inside the car and struggling to escape through the car's halfway rolled-down window. Flores broke the window trying to help and pulled the driver out. "He was very close to dying," Flores told WPRI. "He was already [under] the water completely and the worst thing was that he didn't know how to swim." Neighbors said the driver lost control of his vehicle while trying to navigate the flooded roadway.

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Climate change and flooding in Rhode Island

A US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) information sheet, "What Climate Change Means for Rhode Island," says the state has warmed about three degrees Fahrenheit (1.67 degrees Celsius) since 1900. Throughout the US Northeast, spring is arriving earlier and bringing more precipitation, with heavy rainstorms more frequent.

Sea level is rising, with severe storms causing more floods that damage property and infrastructure. "In the coming decades, the changing climate is likely to increase flooding, harm ecosystems, disrupt fishing, and increase some risks to human health," according to the EPA.

From 1895 to 2011, average annual precipitation from extremely heavy storms has increased 19 percent. Precipitation from extremely heavy storms has increased a staggering 70 percent since 1958.

Human activity such as filling wetlands has destroyed about a third of New England's coastal wetlands since the early 1800s, threatening habitat for many bird and fish species.

As sea levels rise and shorelines erode, storm surges have become higher. "Storms can destroy coastal homes, wash out highways and rail lines, and damage essential communication, energy, and wastewater management infrastructure," the EPA says.

Monday's flash flooding in Rhode Island and Massachusetts is indicative of what can become a more frequent occurrence in New England and other regions of the US, absent the implementation of a globally coordinated program to combat climate change that begins with social needs, not the profits of giant