

California floods cause estimated \$31 billion in damage, 19 dead

Chase Lawrence
15 January 2023

A preliminary estimate by AccuWeather of the damage caused by the series of storms in California puts the total damage and economic cost at \$31 billion to \$34 billion. At least 19 people have perished as a result of the storms since late December. Despite the devastating damage, US President Joseph Biden just signed a disaster declaration on Saturday, nearly a week after California Governor Gavin Newsom requested one.

The sheer amount of precipitation delivered by atmospheric rivers has rapidly brought a significant portion of California out of extreme drought, which has decreased from 27.1 percent of the state last week to just 0.32 percent this week, according to the US drought monitor. Severe drought dropped from 71 to 46 percent. Parts of California have received in excess of three feet of rain. The Sierra Nevada Mountains received record snowfall, which well surpasses seasonal averages, despite the season just starting. Much of the state is receiving rainfall totals of 400 to 600 percent above average.

“By some estimates 22 to 25 trillion gallons of water have fallen over the course last 16-17 days—the stacking of these atmospheric rivers the likes of which we’ve not experienced in our lifetimes,” the governor said at a recent news conference. “The reality is this is just the eighth of what we anticipate will be nine atmospheric rivers,” he further warned. More than 8 million people were under flood watches as of Saturday night, including much of California’s central coastline and the Sacramento and San Joaquin Valleys.

Reservoirs, while receiving some water, are still far below typical storage capacities. Most of the trillions of gallons of water are expected to be lost to runoff in the drought-stricken state. The challenge there is getting the water from outfalls ... or rivers and into the

groundwater,’ Jenny Pensky, a hydrogeologist at the University of California Santa Cruz, told CBS News. She added, “We just don’t quite have the infrastructure for that.”

The corporate media’s response was to tell Californians: “Instead of thinking we can control floods, we have to learn to live with them.” This quote, from Peter Gleick, a climate scientist, was found in the CNN article, “California’s dilemma: How do you harness an epic amount of rain in a water-scarce state? Let it flood, scientists say.” Gleick claims this will “allow us to capture more of these flood flows, store it underground in these aquifers, and then use those ground water resources when we need them in dry years.”

Nicholas Pinter, a researcher and professor of applied geosciences at the University of California at Davis who is also quoted in the article, proposes changing insurance plans to effect forced relocation. “We have to design flood insurance policies to encourage people to move away from flood plains, so we can open up those floodplains, so when we get those floods they will be less damaging.” He also points to the European Union as a model for flood management claiming, “The Europeans in the 1990s started doing this. They made a multi-billion-euro investment to draw levees back.”

For those not familiar with Europe’s flood “management” scheme, which you can read about here, hundreds of people lost their lives in Germany, Belgium, and part of the Netherlands in July 2021 as a result of their policy of basically just letting people die in floods. One of the causes of the death toll was, as the WSWs noted, “decades of underfunding and cuts to infrastructure, including flood barriers, a working early warning system and a disaster prevention system. International experts have pointed out that the high

death toll is directly bound up with inadequacies in these areas.”

Not only is the premise, that allowing even more flooding will allow scarce water resources to be replenished, false, but it is social homicide. It would mean implementing the same laissez-faire approach taken in Europe, and with a proportionally similar number of deaths. It would mean letting even more homes and businesses get washed away, cars get swept under raging currents, and a further erosion of the enlightenment principle of the responsibility of the government to protect the lives of its citizens.

The approach echoes the mantra of the corporate media, political establishment, and corrupt scientists to “learn to live with COVID-19.” A more accurate mantra for both would be to “learn to die with flooding and COVID-19.”

Newsom for his part, while calling for residents to “be vigilant,” is reusing some of the same “pandemic fatigue” propaganda used by Democrats for abandoning any effort to slow the spread of COVID-19. “People are fatigued about evacuation orders. People are fatigued by seeing those Caltrans signs saying ‘detour.’ They’re just fatigued generally.”

Any “fatigue” regarding COVID is the result of the refusal of the government to take any internationally coordinated public health measures, which would have eliminated the deadly disease long ago. At the end of 2021, White House and CDC officials cynically pointed to “fatigue” as one of the justifications for ending of all mitigation measures. At the same time, Biden spewed propaganda claiming that COVID was harmless, over, and that Omicron was a “live vaccine,” etc.

Governor Gavin Newsom has covered up the disastrous response of federal and state authorities to the flooding. In an interview tweeted by the governor, a Weather Channel reporter asked, “Are you happy with the way that it has gone so far? Do you have enough resources?” Newsom responded, “Yeah, we do... not everything goes perfectly, but I’m really proud of our relationships, local, and state, and federally—so far—in this experience.”

California, whose GDP would put it as the fourth richest country on the planet, has spent next to nothing on water resources even as the state’s population has increased by the millions over the decades. If funded, a

scientific plan could mitigate effects and protect lives and homes. The necessary dams to deal with flooding, reservoirs to both store runoff and prepare for droughts as well as the necessary water treatment capacity for such runoff, forestry programs to decrease damaging runoff, and desalinization plants to provide fresh drinking water from salt water, could all be funded and built with a mere fraction of the wealth in the state.

Instead, the money that is required for the necessary infrastructure is hoarded by the tiny corporate financial elite, a significant portion of which reside in California and whom both the Republicans and the Democrats represent.

Climate change, caused by the refusal of world capitalism to address carbon emissions in any substantial way, no doubt has played a central role in the increasingly deadly weather in California. Cyclical droughts and then floods are a feature of California’s climate, and has only been exacerbated by climate change.

The Democrats have played a key role in the failure of the US government to make any effort to stop climate change, and have even accelerated it with the Biden administration pushing Europe off of Russian natural gas, leading Germany to turn to mining millions of additional tons of coal for power plants.

The response by the far-right Republicans of the political establishment has been similarly bankrupt as the Democrats, with a *Wall Street Journal* article decrying “Scientists who seem to believe they can study dry conditions across millennia with enough precision to estimate the percentage of contemporary droughts due to man.” Much like with the COVID-19 pandemic, when the scientific facts are inconvenient for the policy goals of the ruling class, they attack the science.

Only a scientific plan can put an end to the crisis in California, and to the broader climate crisis. What is clear is that only a socialist system is capable of putting in place such a plan. Capitalism is only capable of further mass death and destruction.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact