

Deadly atmospheric river storm causes massive flooding in California, forcing thousands to evacuate

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At least two people have died and some 25 million people in California are under either emergency evacuation and/or flash flood warnings after an atmospheric river storm delivered heavy rain and snow to many parts of the state beginning on Thursday evening and through Friday. As of this writing 34 counties are under a state of emergency, and forecasts estimate that rain will continue throughout the weekend.

The storm, known as a “Pineapple Express,” due to its origins in the warm Pacific waters off the coast of Hawaii, has produced wind gusts in excess of 50 miles per hour and heavy rains leading to the downing of trees and power lines, flooding roads and multiple roof collapses. Despite the fact that the storm was predicted more than a week in advance, hardly any preparations were made by the state or federal governments to protect the population from the deluge.

In the town of Soquel, home to 10,000 people in Santa Cruz County, hundreds of families are trapped after the main road through the Santa Cruz Mountains washed out, forcing its closure. “It’s horrible,” Heather Wingfield, a teacher who has a farm in Soquel, told reporters with the Associated Press. “Hopefully no one has a medical emergency.”

Kathryn Chandler, a Soquel resident, told the *San Francisco Chronicle* in an interview Friday, “My whole family lives up there.” Chandler was attempting to return home Friday, only to find the road had been destroyed. Local officials told the paper they “hoped” to have a “temporary road” built within 24 hours.

In Oakland, California, it is believed the storm played a major role in the partial collapse of a Peet’s Coffee distribution center early Friday morning. One worker, 57-year-old Martin Gonzalez, was killed in the collapse while another worker was sent to the hospital. The collapse is believed to have occurred around 3:15 a.m., according to the Oakland Fire Department.

In a statement issued Friday, Peet’s Coffee spokesperson Mary O’Connell said Gonzalez had been employed with the company “for more than a decade, I think 17 years,” and that the death of the “beloved, liked, well-respected employee ... it is really, really a shock for the employees, for all of us.” O’Connell said that the worker was a “team lead” and had arrived for work at 3:00 a.m., the beginning of his shift.

Had the roof collapsed 45 minutes later, O’Connell said it could have landed on as many as 70 people. “The break room is right in that area as well,” she said. “It’s where people started their day. He was there getting ready for the day. It’s unbelievable.”

Hours earlier, Thursday night in rural Pioneer, California, about 60 miles east of Sacramento, the roof of the local Dollar General store collapsed while four workers were inside the building. According to the Amador Fire Protection District, miraculously no workers were injured. The department said the building was a “total loss.”

The fire department did not name a cause of the collapse, but photos posted online show piles of snow surrounding the building and a thick layer of snow on

top of the buckling structure.

While the atmospheric storm on its own is a highly dangerous event, the damage it will cause, as shown with the roof collapse in Pioneer, has been exacerbated because it comes on the heels of a massive snowstorm that dropped multiple feet of snow across the state, leading to power outages and trapping thousands of people in their homes.

On Thursday, the San Bernardino County Sheriff's Office confirmed that it had responded to 13 death investigations since last month's winter storm. The police said they are investigating eight of the deaths in relation to the storm. The other five deaths occurred in a hospice setting and will not be investigated.

In an interview with the *New York Times*, Crestline resident Rhea-Frances Tetley, 72, said she thought there were many more deaths left to be uncovered. "I'm sure they haven't found everyone yet," she told the newspaper. "I only was just able to get out of my house yesterday afternoon, and it took two strong men to dig out the driveway."

Tetley lives across the street from 93-year-old Elinor "Dolly" Aventatti, who the *Times* wrote was found dead "bundled up in a chair in front of her fireplace, which had gone cold."

Barbie Hughes, 39, a local hardware clerk, was killed in late February after she was struck by a car while walking home. The day Hughes was hit, over a foot of snow had fallen in the area.

A San Bernardino resident told the *World Socialist Web Site* that he had "never seen rain like this before. Or even snow. The ice storms were the worst. Even the mountain people aren't used to this kind of weather. I don't think anywhere in California has the infrastructure to deal with this." He noted that "a lot of elderly people live out here, and these deaths are just horrible."

In the mountain town of Big Bear Lake, home to just over 5,000 people, the *Times* noted that during a City Council meeting this week, local officials reported over seven feet of snow had fallen in the area in the last 15 days and that many "tragedies" occurred in town

because residents were trapped in their homes without access to medical treatment.

On Friday, well after mass evacuation orders were in effect and thousands of homes and properties had been inundated with water, President Joe Biden authorized an emergency request from California Governor Gavin Newsom.

Speaking to the *Los Angeles Times*, multiple San Bernardino County residents reported a complete lack of support from the local government. Cedar Glen resident Mark Steven Young, 70, told the paper he had called over 20 different people or government agencies in the last two weeks while he was snowed in at his home, only to receive no response.

Kristy Baltezare, a Crestline resident, told the paper that during a welfare check she discovered that her neighbor had died. "I have people calling me crying because they're so exhausted, and they're terrified that they're not going to be able to save their neighbors' lives because they've been digging for days and days to get to people," she said.

"I know there are people dead," Baltezare added. "This is not good. We still have half our community we haven't made contact with."

Pleading ignorance in order to cover for the criminal inaction which has led to the preventable deaths of over a dozen people, San Bernardino County Chief Executive Leonard Hernandez claimed in a recent video conference that county officials were not "fully prepared" for the storms and that "there are a lot of lessons that we're going to learn from this."



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