

Texas flood hearings reveal widespread failures in response and prevention while leaving Abbott and Trump blameless

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1 August 2025

A joint legislative hearing was held Thursday in the town of Kerrville, Texas to review the response to the July 4 flooding on the banks of the Guadalupe River leading to the deaths of at least 135 people and the displacement of thousands more from their homes.

The hearing was conducted by the joint Texas House and Senate committees on Disaster Preparedness and Flooding. It heard testimony from a group of invited officials involved in the disaster response as well as community members directly affected by the flooding.

Noticeably absent from the hearings Thursday and a previous such event held July 23 were Texas governor Greg Abbott and officials from either the Trump administration or the Federal Emergency Management Administration (FEMA), who bear the lion's share of blame for the disaster. The highest figure present at both events was Texas Lieutenant Governor Dan Patrick.

Both Abbott and Trump have diverted billions of dollars from natural disaster response and prevention in order to provide tax breaks and subsidies to the ultra-wealthy along with massively boosting the repressive apparatus of the state to attack working class immigrants, using the pretext of a non-existent border "invasion."

The state of Texas under Abbott has spent \$11 billion over the past five years on the anti-immigrant "Operation Lone Star," while state funding of \$500 million for an emergency alert system was shelved and a similar initiative costing less than \$1 million in Kerr County was rejected by local officials. This is on top of massive cuts to FEMA and the National Weather Service (NWS) by Trump and by Elon Musk's Department of Government Efficiency. The resultant understaffing contributed to the loss of life in Texas, including 27 campers and counselors at the Camp Mystic all-girls summer camp.

The Trump administration has made no mention of the flood over the past several weeks, while the mainstream media has either dropped the issue or provided the most minimal coverage of the disaster. Official aid organizations have long since left the devastated area, leaving residents to recover entirely on

their own.

Four days after the initial disaster, Governor Abbott referred to those seeking accountability as using the "word choice of losers." A similar tone was set at Thursday's hearing by committee chair Senator Charles Perry, admonishing the audience of flood victims that the hearing was "not a place where you're going to throw rocks at each other or accuse each other." The audience was also warned that "outbursts or vocal displays of support or opposition from the audience" were prohibited, along with the presence of "signs, placards and other objects of a similar nature."

In spite of the highly choreographed nature of the affair—community members' questions were vetted before they were allowed to speak and they were given only three minutes each—many highly damning issues emerged in the proceedings.

It quickly became apparent, for example, that emergency response officials took no meaningful action for at least three hours after becoming aware that they were facing a significant flooding event. While the first reports of flooding at the Camp Mystic cabins occurred around 2:10 am on the morning of July 4 and the first 911 emergency call was received at 2:53 am, a code red warning was not issued until after 5 am that morning.

Kerr County Judge Rob Kelly testified that his office, which helps to coordinate emergency response, received no alerts indicating a major weather event the previous day. "It [the flood] was not forecast by the National Weather Service," Kelly claimed. "It was not expected by our emergency response team."

Sheriff Larry Leitha, also a member of the emergency response team, noted in a particularly harrowing testimony that sheriff's deputies had heard children "screaming" on the Guadalupe River around two hours prior to the code red warning being issued. He went on to claim that "no alert system would have prevented the tragic loss of life that was upriver."

However, the Texas Emergency Management Coordination Center met twice on July 3 precisely because severe rainfall and attendant flooding was expected over the weekend. But the very institutions cited by Kelly and Leitha as providing the

critical forecasts, alerts and extreme weather modeling on which they depend for emergency coordination and response, the National Weather Service (NWS), National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) and US Geological Survey (USGS), have all undergone massive cuts by the Trump administration.

These include 600 employee cuts from the NWS alone, and 1,029 overall from the NOAA (the NWS is a subsidiary of the NOAA), on top of the firing of 880 probationary and recently hired workers during the opening months of Trump's second term. Furthermore, the Trump administration is proposing a 25 percent cut to the NOAA's budget, including the elimination of its research division and major reductions to other key offices such as the National Centers for Environmental Information.

Such actions are similar to those of the Trump administration and the Biden administration before it in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic. As deaths continued to rise and public health measures were found to be woefully inadequate, the ruling class responded by ending public health measures altogether while cutting off any and all communicable disease monitoring activities. Similarly, as the effects of man-made climate change make themselves felt in catastrophic natural disasters such as the central Texas flood, the resources and personnel needed to analyze and prepare for such events are being done away with.

All of this was ignored by the assembled state officials, who instead sought to scapegoat low-level officials for the disaster.

William T. Thomas IV, the emergency management coordinator for Kerr County, admitted Thursday morning that he was ill and asleep during the early morning hours of July 4 and was thus unavailable for the initial emergency response activities, prompting gasps from the assembled lawmakers.

Judge Kelly received criticism as well as from Lieutenant Governor Patrick for his lackadaisical response. "Judge Kelly, I never saw you on day one," he said. "I came here from Austin, in this room, I talked to the sheriff multiple times, I talked to the mayor multiple times, we had a meeting when we got here."

Patrick, however, did not explain why the governor himself took more than 3 days to visit the impacted flood areas or why the latter hasn't attended the two flood hearings while he is prioritizing state gerrymandering efforts at the behest of the Trump administration. Also not mentioned was the non-existent response of the Trump administration and the failure of his Department of Homeland Security secretary, the fascist Kristi Noem, to mobilize FEMA resources until three days after the flood started.

Also under fire was the Guadalupe River Authority, which had failed to implement an early warning system of its own, with lawmakers suggesting it could be folded into a larger, neighboring water authority, possibly putting at risk its existing flood detection services.

While contributions by the actual flood victims were limited by time, the attendees expressed little interest in this small

change of bureaucratic scapegoating. One speaker who lost her home and had friends and neighbors who lost their lives repeatedly cried out, "No one came!" She said residents were forced to search for dead bodies and possible survivors on their own in the first days of the flood.

Another speaker noted that there has been little to no effort to carry out hazardous clean-up in the river and surrounding water bodies, in which hundreds of cars were washed away and which continue to leak gasoline and oil almost a month later. Another stated, "We've identified 136 victims, but these are often identified based on found body parts only. A finger or leg is identified based on prints or DNA, but the rest of the body parts are still somewhere else."

Others said they found dead body parts or entire dead bodies on their properties and waited days for officials to remove them while the cadavers rotted in the sun.

Flood victim Mike Richards, 67, told the assembled officials that nearly a month later the flood area "still looks like a bomb went off."

"Not a damned penny came through this gate from my taxpaying dollars," he added. He continued, "As far as the state goes, let me tell you about the state. I think the state involvement, as far as I'm concerned, is pathetic... There are so many different things that are wrong. For instance, FEMA sucks."

A local meteorologist who testified spoke directly of Trump's cuts to NWS personnel as a major contributing factor. After that statement, the panel immediately cut him off and told him his time was up.

In the course of the discussion, various measures were proposed to prevent future devastation, including the cleaning out of culverts, more cell phone towers in rural areas so that residents were more likely to receive alerts, the supplementation of cell phone alerts with traditional siren warnings, more river gauges, levee repairs, better coordination between emergency personnel, bridges over low lying roads and highways, etc.

However, none of these will be implemented under conditions where the ruling class is committed to war, repression and the preservation of the extreme wealth of the super-rich. Any measures that are taken will be of the most meager and inadequate character. The task of saving lives and providing the infrastructure needed to address the extreme dangers of climate change falls to the working class.



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