

In the face of lawsuits filed by families of flood victims

# Camp Mystic announces plans to reopen with new flood precautions as FEMA chief steps down

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Camp Mystic, the Christian summer camp where 27 children died in the July 4 Guadalupe River flood in Kerr County, Texas, announced this week that it was planning to reopen this summer with new precautions against flooding. They include four flood warning monitors, two-way radios in cabins with national weather alerts and generators in some buildings.

Camp management said the plans are aimed at exceeding recently passed state laws requiring camps along rivers to have warning systems and evacuation plans. The laws also prohibit building cabins within floodplains and establishes a limited grant program for local governments and agencies to construct flood warning systems.

The camp will also only reopen the Cypress Lake camp south of the main Camp Mystic site where the deaths occurred. Cypress Lake is not along the Guadalupe River, where most of the flooding occurred, but is along Cyprus Creek where substantial flooding also happened.

News of the camp's new measures comes after FEMA chief David Richardson resigned in mid November. Richardson was appointed purely as a Trump loyalist with no experience in disaster response or management. He faced extensive criticism for how FEMA responded to the floods, with critical delays in response and inadequate resources allocated, costing lives.

Rather than a response to criticism, his resignation prefaces an extensive restructuring of the agency. The FEMA Review Council is set to release a report on recommended reforms to the agency. Department of Homeland Security (DHS) Secretary Kristi Noem's office has reportedly heavily edited the report and is expected to utilize it to drastically reduce the agency's capacity. Noem and other Trump administration officials have backed proposals to gut the agency and even plan to dismantle it entirely.

Richardson will be replaced by senior adviser Karen Evans. Evans' tenure at FEMA has consisted of ripping up grant programs and denying disaster relief funds to hard hit communities. A report by CNN quoted FEMA employees calling her the "terminator" for "terminating grants, terminating contracts, terminating people." As the head of FEMA she will be tasked with dismantling the agency as it exists today and turning it into an

appendage of DHS's anti-immigrant campaign. Disaster response programs will be ripped apart while money is reallocated to building immigrant detention centers. FEMA has already allocated over \$600 million to states for the construction of concentration camps to house people kidnapped by ICE and Border Patrol Gestapo.

Amidst this attack on emergency management, the families of the flood victims have criticized the plan to reopen the camp. Several have filed lawsuits against camp management for its role in their children's death, alleging that the owners were aware of the flood risk, both during the flood and for years prior, but failed to take appropriate action to save lives.

According to the lawsuits, camp owner and director Dick Eastland, who died in the flood, and his family were aware of the impending flooding but decided to spend over an hour securing camp property instead of evacuating campers. According to the suits, camp management instructed campers and counselors to shelter in place even as water entered the cabins.

Many of the children who escaped to higher ground did so only because counselors decided to evacuate the children on their own initiative, breaking windows to escape rising water. According to one lawsuit, it was only after gatekeeper Francis Blackwell was washed away by the flood waters that the Eastlands decided to begin evacuating campers.

Only five of the cabins were evacuated to the two-story rec hall nearby: Bug House, Look Inn, Hang Out, Tumble Inn and Jumble House. Six were never evacuated by the camp managers: Nut Hut, Chatter Box, Wiggle Inn, Giggle Box, Twins and Bubble Inn. Twins and Bubble Inn were the cabins where the girls who died were sheltering.

The suits further allege that the camp did not have an appropriate plan to respond to a flood. A copy of the camp's safety manual in the suit shows only a short paragraph instructing campers and staff to shelter in place during a flood, asserting that "All cabins are constructed on high, safe locations."

Such a claim is challenged in the lawsuits with references to flood maps from FEMA which show nearly all of the camp's buildings along the Upper Guadalupe within the 100-year flood

zone. A 100-year flood is an event estimated to have a 1 percent chance of occurring in any given year based on historic stream flow patterns.

The suits further reference the history of flooding in the Upper Guadalupe, which is considered one of the most dangerous regions in the United States for flash floods, earning the nickname “flash flood alley.” They cite several floods that damaged the camp in its 100-year history, including a major flood in 1987 that killed 10 children from a nearby camp.

Following that flood, Dick Eastland, then a board member of the Upper Guadalupe River Management Authority, championed the construction of a modern flood warning system that was paid for by a modest increase in property taxes. However, by the late '90s, the warning system had fallen into disrepair. Instead of using the agency's millions of dollars in reserve funds to update the warning system, it decided to grant tax cuts to pay down its budget surplus. Dick Eastland would again be appointed to the board by Governor Abbott in 2022 and 2025. The suits argue that since Eastland was both a former and sitting member on the board he was intimately aware of the flood risk at Camp Mystic and failed to take action to protect campers.

Additionally, the suits reference several documents filed by Camp Mystic to amend the FEMA flood maps to have more than 30 structures removed from the flood zone. This is an arduous and often expensive process in which the camp hired an engineering firm to survey the camp and conduct its own hydraulic modeling.

These appeals were granted by FEMA and the suits argue that the Eastlands filed them to avoid having to pay for flood insurance, which is required for properties within a 100-year flood zone. Despite approval from FEMA in 2013, the flood maps have yet to be redrawn to remove the buildings.

Summarizing the actions of the Eastlands, one suit argues that the Eastland family's actions constituted a decision to “prioritize profits over the safety of campers.” It argues that the Eastlands separated ownership of the camp and the land into two companies so that they could profit from the camp while protecting themselves from liability.

From these claims the plaintiffs argue that Camp Mystic acted with “gross negligence” that resulted in the wrongful deaths of their children.

The lawsuits paint a picture of an increasingly deadly aspect of life under American capitalism, where human life is subordinate to the interests of profit.

However, regardless of any personal responsibility of the Eastlands, blame ultimately lies with the capitalist system and its state officials who refused to implement an adequate flood warning system and properly respond with rescue operations.

The Upper Guadalupe River Authority not only refused to update the decaying warning system but decided to return money to property owners. When Kerr County attempted to acquire funds for one, through a federal program, it was denied by Republican state officials in charge of administering FEMA funds twice and a state run program will now only provide \$50,000 in grants and a \$1 million interest-free loan.

This is a common issue across the state. Texas has \$54 billion in flood management projects waiting for funding but the state has

only allocated a small fraction of that in funds.

Additionally, both FEMA and state and local officials failed to respond quickly and with adequate resources to save lives despite the clear and present danger.

Texas' new flood laws also only implement minor reforms—many of which should have already been in place. They are designed to cover for the state's decades of inaction while shifting responsibility away from the state government.

Further seeking to shirk responsibility, the Texas state government has launched an investigation into the flood, where it will seek every culprit but itself. Every effort will be made to shift blame onto the Eastlands, improbable weather and even the “will of God.”

In the aftermath of the flood, the bourgeois press attempted to shift attention to FEMA, using unverified models from financial analysis company First Street, which claimed FEMA had underestimated the flood risk at Camp Mystic, implying that FEMA had failed to inform local officials of the true dangers. This was despite FEMA showing nearly all affected buildings in its flood map, the flood extending well past the 500-year (0.2 percent chance) boundary and the nearest federal stream gauge recording maximum flows 10 times higher on July 4 than the previous record ever documented (295,000 cubic feet per second). Regardless of the limitations of FEMA's flood maps, even if the agency had updated them prior to the flood, it would not have changed that the area was denied a proper warning system and evacuation plan.

Efforts have been made, and will continue to be made, presenting the Camp Mystic disaster as the result of something unforeseen, even unavoidable. In reality, the risks were well known by both camp management and government officials. Had proper measures been taken, the disaster was completely avoidable.

It is these servants of big business—representatives of an economic and political system seeking to gut federal social services and establish a presidential dictatorship—that bear ultimate responsibility for the deaths of the people who died at Camp Mystic and the thousands more who die in preventable tragedies every year.



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