

Historic flooding in South Carolina leaves fourteen dead

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At least 14 people have been confirmed to have died in the unprecedented flooding which has devastated the state of South Carolina since heavy rains began to fall in the region last Thursday.

Flooding has been most severe in the coastal city of Charleston, the capital city of Columbia and surrounding counties. According to John Shelton of the US Geological Survey, the entire state received six months' worth of rainfall in just two days. At least nine South Carolina cities surveyed by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) broke their one-day rainfall records for the month of October, and six of them broke one-day records for any month of the year.

The historic flood was caused when Hurricane Joaquin combined with other storm systems in the area to produce a powerful and long-lasting downpour from what NOAA meteorologists have described as a "fire hose" of tropical moisture. The disaster has been repeatedly referred to as a "thousand year flood," meaning there is only a 1 in 1000 chance that a storm of such severity could occur in a given year.

On Monday, President Obama declared a major disaster, making federal aid available to 11 counties affected by the storms. In addition to loss of life, current estimates report that flooding has already caused more than \$1 billion in damage.

According to South Carolina Governor Nikki Haley, 550 roads and bridges were closed as of Monday. Some 40,000 homes were without drinking water, while many areas where service remained were placed under boil water advisories. About 26,000 homes had no electricity.

Numerous water main breaks also caused an interruption in water service to Columbia-area hospitals for part of the day on Monday. Stored water supplies

and continuous water shuttling from firefighters allowed the hospitals to remain open.

However, the hospitals, Palmetto Health Richland and Palmetto Health Baptist, are only carrying out emergency procedures and stopped accepting critical care patients transferred from other medical centers.

Because of the shortage of water on Monday, Providence Hospital, another Columbia hospital, temporarily suspended life-sustaining dialysis treatments for patients with kidney-failure.

At least 18 dams were breached by flood waters, prompting authorities to order mandatory evacuations in multiple districts. Five-hundred homes were evacuated in the Forest Acres neighborhood of Columbia over fears of rising waters in Gills Creek. City officials ordered a mandatory evacuation in the area of the Overcreek Bridge dam after a breach there Monday afternoon. Richland County Representative Joel Lourie told the *Charlotte Observer* the dam is in danger of total failure, in which case it would "unload about 22 acres of water."

The South Carolina Helicopter Aquatic Rescue Team saved between 25 and 30 people on Sunday and Monday, lowering rescue baskets down to many houses to pluck people from their porches where they stood waving towels to get the attention of emergency workers. More than 900 people have been relocated to emergency shelters.

A number of counties have issued curfews to discourage residents from driving on flooded roads and highways. Major highways into and out of Columbia have been blocked off, including a 75-mile long section of interstate 95. Sinkholes have been opened up by floodwaters in a number of locations. In recent days, more than 750 motorists have placed calls with emergency services to request assistance.

While heavy rains finally began to subside on Tuesday, more flooding and evacuations are likely as accumulated floodwaters continue to move throughout the region, threatening areas which have not yet been affected.

The historic storms and subsequent flooding have come crashing into an already desperate social situation. South Carolina's official poverty rate stands at 18.6 percent, making it the ninth highest in the US. 27.5 percent of those under the age of 18 live in poverty. With both residential homes and workplaces wiped out by the floods, the region's most vulnerable layers will find it difficult to cope.

The storms have also exposed the disastrous condition of South Carolina infrastructure. Boil water advisories are not just emergency measures, but a fixture of life throughout the year in Columbia where sewer and water lines remain in a state of chronic disrepair.

According to a report published in May of this year, South Carolina's rural roads have the second highest fatality rate in the nation after Connecticut. About 50 percent of the state's secondary roads, which are not eligible for federal aid, were rated in poor condition in 2013. This represented a 52 percent increase over the number of roads in poor condition just five years earlier.

Approximately 12 percent of the state's rural bridges were also rated structurally deficient in 2014.

A long-range report issued by the state Department of Transportation in 2014 estimated that an additional \$1.4 billion a year for 29 years would be needed in order to bring the state's transportation infrastructure up to an acceptable condition.

A bill to provide just \$400 million for improvements to South Carolina roads stalled out in the state legislature in June. Funding was to be based on a regressive tax of 12 percent per gallon of gasoline and other measures which would only add to the financial burden on the working class in the state.

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