

Record flooding continues to inundate US Midwest

By Jonas Boquist
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The inundation of the central United States from a bomb cyclone storm system on March 13 has left four known dead, forced thousands from their homes and inflicted billions of dollars in damage to infrastructure, housing, agriculture and industry.

The upper Mississippi and eastern Missouri Rivers had recently received record snowfalls, up to 200 percent above normal. Still-frozen ground prevented the absorption of the runoff triggering major floods in Nebraska, Iowa and Missouri, the likes of which have not been witnessed in 50 years. At least a dozen levees in these states were breached.

With rising temperatures, rain fell on snow, speeding the pace of melting and rapidly inundated rivers. Record flood levels have been registered at 42 locations across six states and the effects are still being felt more than a week later.

In Nebraska, 70 percent of the state is under a disaster declaration affecting 88 cities and 65 of the state's 93 counties. One dam burst, roads washed away, bridges were closed and some communities were completely cut off.

Over 2,000 homes and 300 businesses were damaged with estimated losses of \$85 million. Infrastructure losses are at \$439 million while the state's agricultural sector has lost \$400 million in livestock and \$440 million in crops.

In Iowa the losses are estimated at \$1.6 billion. Some 1,200 homes are damaged with a repair bill that will exceed \$480 million. Businesses suffered another \$300 million and the losses to agriculture are at \$214 million.

Most recently the flooding has hit towns in Missouri and Kansas. Flooding has closed more than 100 roads in Missouri. St. Joseph, Missouri, had to quickly evacuate 7,000 people as the Missouri River crested

inches short of the record of 32.07 feet set during the historic flood of 1993.

As mind-numbing as the statistics are, they are only a snapshot of a still developing disaster. Further melting of snow and ice along with more rains promise to bring even more flooding. Besides those levees that have been destroyed, the US Army Corps of Engineers reported that some 200 miles of levees in four states were compromised.

In Iowa alone, some 70 miles of levees operated by the Corps are damaged or washed out and it will cost \$350 million to repair them. And the time required for repairs can be up to six months.

But the Corps of Engineers has a mere 15 percent of the nation's levees under their jurisdiction. Those remaining are under local, state and Indian reservation oversight. Given economic problems and budget cuts it remains unclear what their condition might be and what is in store for the communities they are meant to protect.

Other dangers are lurking in the background. The degree to which toxic industrial chemicals are being leached into the environment, or how many open-air lagoons of hog farms may be in danger of being overrun by flooding is, as yet, unknown.

Meanwhile, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) has predicted some 25 states are at an elevated risk of flooding through the end of May. A NOAA press release stated, "This is shaping up to be a potentially unprecedented flood season, with more than 200 million people at risk for flooding in their communities."

Mary C. Erickson, deputy director of the National Weather Service, predicted at a press conference last week, "The flooding this year could be worse than anything we've seen in recent years, even worse than

the historic floods of 1993 and 2011.”

But nagging questions persist. Why were there not advanced notice and more measures taken to protect against this catastrophe? Were there detectable warning signs?

Certainly, record snowfalls should have triggered emergency operations.

The Climate Prediction Center confirmed on February 15 that a “weak El Niño” climate pattern had formed in the Pacific and that it might increase in strength. The El Niño phenomena results from increased warm water surface temperatures in the Pacific Ocean around December. And, while difficult to predict, it can portend increased wet weather across the United States.

Even further back, a December 13 article in USA Today reported that “Strong El Niños can lead to floods in the western United States...” It also cited a recent study by the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organization in Australia, which warned, “El Niños will be stronger and more frequent in the decades ahead because of global warming, causing ‘more extreme events’ in the United States and around the world.”

But despite the overwhelming number of climate scientists who have sought to bring these dangers to the attention of the authorities, little is being done. Why?

While some still seek to call events such as the flooding in the Midwest “natural disasters,” this is a bald cover-up. Global climate change is now understood to be highly influenced by human activity. But this human activity has largely occurred during a period of history dominated by the capitalist mode of production.

The locks, bridges, levees, dams, dredging, flood-ways and other infrastructure that dot the Mississippi and other rivers greatly facilitated the process of capitalist expansion and progress. But this expansion always had a concomitant factor—the capitalist profit motive.

What necessarily fueled the profits of capitalism in terms of river infrastructure did not always extend to the communities of workers, farmers, small businesses and Native Americans on reservations. And today, under the decline of capitalism with record budget cuts and tax windfalls for the rich, the capitalist state finds the needs of the masses of people more of a hindrance

than a concern.

Cities, seeking added tax revenue and pressured for housing, conspired with real estate and construction companies to expand housing into areas of greater flood risk, even as the effects of climate change and development further amplify that risk.

During the epic flood in 1993, workers in Des Moines, Iowa, explained that previously flooded housing areas were quickly rehabbed and sold to unsuspecting immigrants for short-term profits.

The example of Hamburg, Iowa, during the current flooding is a case which serves as an indictment of the capitalist system.

Located along the Missouri River, with a population of 1,100, Hamburg long had an 18-foot levee as a barricade to flood-waters. In 2011, when even higher floodwaters threatened the town, residents and the Army Corps of Engineers hastened to add another eight-to-nine foot makeshift structure on top of the existing levee.

The structure held and saved the city from the 2011 floods. But the Corps of Engineers declared the 2011 addition to the levee was dangerous and did not meet specifications. It was removed but never replaced because the Corps did not have the funds for the project and efforts of the locals to raise funds came up short. Then came the recent floods, engulfing the town and leaving residents deeply angered.

During the same period, trillions of dollars were transferred to US banks in wake of the 2008 banking crisis. Trillions have been dedicated to building up the military and financing wars. But nothing was done during the last eight years for the residents of Hamburg, who will now incur the costs of repairing their homes or relocating to restart their lives.

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