

Central Michigan residents speak on dam failures that sparked historic flooding

By Luke Galvin
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On Tuesday, two central Michigan dams breached, causing a chain reaction of flooding, which culminated in the destruction of significant portions of Midland County, including most of the village of Sanford and the downtown area of the city of Midland.

While the overrun Sanford dam continues to stand, the privately-owned dam in Edenville was blown out, triggering the collapse of dikes and dams throughout Midland County, including the Smallwood dam and the Poseyville dike.

The flooding has displaced over 10,000 residents and washed out multiple bridges and roads, forcing many to gather at emergency shelters established at local school buildings. These concentrated gathering areas now have the potential to become hotbeds for the COVID-19 pandemic.

Compounding this disaster, which is a manifestation of decades of infrastructural neglect and the impact of climate change, the goliath Dow Chemical's sprawling facility, based in Midland since 1897, has been flooded, threatening damaging chemical leaks.

While admitting that flood waters mixed with its on-site containment ponds, the company has not released any further information. Local and state officials have effectively left Dow to operate without any supervision for decades, resulting in their inability to claim that no chemicals leaked during the flooding of the Tittabawassee River, which runs alongside the sprawling company complex. Dow's emergency sirens did go off but were reported by the company to only have done so accidentally.

In the face of the chaos caused by the flooding and the shock and worry of residents compounded by the ongoing pandemic, Michigan's Democratic governor Gretchen Whitmer, has pumped out platitudes about unity and reassured residents that "we will get through

this too." There has been no effort on her administration's part to criticize or raise questions about Dow and its lack of preparation for flooding of this magnitude, especially given its well-known role in contaminating the Tittabawassee river.

The overarching explanation of the disaster coming from Whitmer has been that the flooding is the result of a 500-year weather event. Such rhetoric is Whitmer's not-so-subtle attempt to divert criticism from Michigan's failing and neglected dam and flood protection infrastructure.

The dangers posed by Michigan's crumbling infrastructure, which finds parallels across the country, becomes especially prevalent when one considers the statements given to the WSWs by a rain spotter for the National Weather Service in nearby Bay City.

"The catastrophic flooding was not caused by a 'one-in-500-year rain event'. That's nonsense," the rain spotter noted. "This is a one-in-500-year disaster, but it was caused by the failure of the dams. I measure rain precipitation rates. The amount of rain I measured was just shy of four inches. We've gotten four inches before. If it weren't for the dam breaking, there would not have been this amount of damage."

They noted further that, "Both the state of Michigan and the federal government issued non-compliance orders regarding these private dams. The upshot? Don't put money into something that doesn't make money. This is capitalism at its finest."

Residents have taken to social media to get in touch with relatives and friends to offer or ask for meals and other resources. Others are seeking to assess the scale of the damages, with one resident asking on Facebook "what is a recommended process for when you have flood/water damage but your insurance agency denied your claim because you actually weren't allowed to

carry flood insurance on your house because it was believed to never be possible?”

Expressing the grave nature of the crisis from many, one resident wrote, “All right Sanford, a painful and awkward question to ask.... has anyone seen my home? It was the house on the way into the ball diamonds. I know its been destroyed. I just wonder if any small part of it is still around.” Another, outlining the dire medical repercussions of the disaster, stated “We just got a request in our network at www.findthehelpers.us that is of urgent need. A person on oxygen with no power. Does anyone have a generator that they can loan?”

A resident of Midland explained to WDIV Local 4 news that they didn’t “know how fast we would be able to recover from this,” especially given the hit the community had already taken from flooding in 2017. Many local small businesses in Sanford and Midland have been destroyed, a death knell for many that were already suffering under measures implemented to slow the spread of the coronavirus.

Members of the Dow Chemical Employees’ Credit Union have also faced restrictions with withdrawal caps and limited service due to power outages and other hindrances faced by the bank. Thus, under the fused crisis of the pandemic and the flood, some Midland residents already facing financial hardship or ruin must now deal with unnecessary financial restrictions.

In response to the widespread devastation, Whitmer has only mentioned her hopes for Trump to give residents aid while announcing her request for support from the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). Only in hindsight did Whitmer lament the “underinvestment” in the state’s dam infrastructure, briefly mentioning that she didn’t “think that they [private companies] should” run critical dams. Whitmer said, responding to the criminal mismanagement of the now crumbling dams by private owners, “Where there’s culpability, we will pursue...holding people accountable.” Given her administration’s treatment of Dow, there is no reason to expect any fundamental changes.

The larger question to be asked is why private owners control the dams and critical flood protection infrastructure in the first place. Luckily this is an easy question to answer since one only needs to look at the

substantially criminal role played by decades of rule by Republican and Democratic administrations in Michigan. Whether Republican or Democrat, the ruling class’ political puppets have made every effort to capture every scrap of wealth that they can harvest from Michigan for decades, selling freshwater supplies to Nestle, allowing fracking, poisoning the water of Flint and throwing Detroit into bankruptcy.

The most apparent message one can glean from Whitmer’s statements is one of complacency. In the minds of those in positions of local and state authority, residents must wait out the flood just as workers must tough out the pandemic. Even if people can wait out the flooding, the threat posed by chemical leaks leaves returning residents and small business owners at the mercy of whatever chemical cocktail is left behind. Federal agents have announced that it will take some time before the area surrounding Dow is safe enough to test, making the threat of residual contamination that much more imminent.

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