

As new report indicates larger floods loom nationally

## Paltry federal relief announced for central Michigan flood victims

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It has been nearly two months since the breaching of the Sanford, Edenville and Smallwood dams in central Michigan. Along with subsequent dike failures along the Tittabawassee River the breaches caused record flooding and damage throughout the Midland County, Michigan, region. On July 10, seven weeks later, the Trump administration finally officially declared the area to be a major disaster area.

The declaration allows for up to \$43 million of federal relief aid to be provided through the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), the Small Business Administration, and the US Department of Agriculture. These funds, however, represent only a small percentage of the actual damage inflicted on the region, which is at least six to seven times that amount by official accounts.

Thus far government agencies estimate the cost of the damages dealt to homes, businesses and buildings at \$190 million in Midland County, with an additional \$55 million for infrastructure damage. The flooding destroyed most of the village of Sanford, emptied Wixom and Sanford Lake and covered the downtown area of the city of Midland in as much as 12 feet of water at points. Flooding forced the evacuation of over 10,000 residents, some of whom remain in very precarious circumstances.

Reports are emerging of continuing social, health and economic fallout in the region. Sanford, for instance, faced the brunt of the flood's onslaught with many of its homes and businesses demolished or severely damaged. The village's lake-reliant recreational economy is also very likely to collapse completely with the draining of the Sanford Lake.

In neighboring Gladwin County, the flooding has

impacted over 300 residents who face little to no access to water from reliance on wells that are now too shallow to be functional due to a drop in groundwater levels.

The *Detroit News* reported that the average cost for digging wells deeper in the area to attempt to counteract the groundwater drop is \$5,000. Residents are currently being told by officials that they need to live on bottled water. The return of the wells to normal function depends on the restoration of the breached dams. The Four Lakes Task Force estimates rebuilding taking three to six years at the cost of \$220 million.

While the day to day life of residents continues to worsen, virtually nothing is being done by state and local governments. Midland County families in need of assistance for destroyed home appliances like furnaces and air-conditioners and damage to basements, vehicles or entire homes are being forced to turn to local religious groups for basic forms of aid.

Most residents and businesses in the area do not have flood insurance, and local and state government relief aid failed to mitigate much of the disaster. Desperate residents have filed numerous class-action lawsuits against the private owner of the Edenville dam, Boyce Hydro LLC, as well as Midland County, the Michigan Department of Natural Resources and the EGLE (Michigan Department of Environment, Great Lakes and Energy). These lawsuits will likely take years to resolve, if residents can even afford the legal costs.

FEMA's involvement in the recovery efforts will also likely provide little to no substantive relief or comfort to those impacted by the floods, if history is an indicator. The agency played an especially notorious role in the responses to both Hurricane Katrina and

Hurricane Sandy, failing to provide any assistance to those affected while enriching companies like Carnival Cruise Lines.

The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic also quickly collided with ongoing cleanup efforts.

A recent report from NPR revealed that many cleanup workers were brought in from private companies, with a large contingent of heavily exploited immigrant workers. The report details the horrid conditions on the job site, the cramped hotel rooms serving as temporary living quarters for workers, and the lack of access to masks. At least nineteen workers from one company at the Midland recovery site were documented as having contracted COVID-19.

Democratic Governor Gretchen Whitmer, for her part, responded to the outbreak by seeking to blame the workers themselves, claiming in an interview with WDET in Detroit that they “brought COVID-19 with them.”

The Whitmer administration, like its Republican and Democratic predecessors, has overseen and defended a large push for privatization of infrastructure and education, which has contributed to the decay, defunding and breakdown of dams and public education.

Making matters even worse is the ongoing impact of the floods upon Midland’s sprawling Dow Chemical Company complex. Located on the bank of the Tittabawassee River, the notorious industrial polluter saw its containment ponds overflow during the flooding in May. The WSWS reported on the implications of this aspect of the floods, outlining the potential environmental risk this poses for any area downstream of the complex.

As of July 12, EGLE has only released preliminary test results from its investigation into possible contamination showing low dioxin levels downstream. The full scale of testing has yet to cover major areas of concern, such as the heavily contaminated riverbanks near Dow, the containment ponds and Dow’s manufacturing areas. Given Dow was forced to pay \$77 million just last year to restore nearby fish and wildlife habitats contaminated by its past actions, the likelihood of further contamination from the flooding is very high.

While the chain of failures and disaster in central Michigan is a sharp expression of the failing privatized infrastructure of the state, it is by no means unique.

A recent report by the Brooklyn-based First Street Foundation outlines the national scale of similar events that are at risk of unfolding. The report reveals 70 percent more homes at risk of flooding than currently shown on FEMA’s Special Flood Hazard Area maps. In Michigan alone, the study lists 400,000 more homes at risk of flooding damage than listed by federal government, meaning that most of these homes do not have flood insurance. The First Street Foundation study conclusions take into account the impact of climate and environmental change, unlike FEMA which only considers historical risk each year.

Underlying the threat of larger flooding is the aging infrastructure of dams, bridges and roads, often badly in need of repairs. If added to the First Street and FEMA reports, the threat of future flooding and flood damage from crumbling infrastructure is undoubtedly even larger.

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