

Mississippi crests in Memphis at nearly 48 feet

May 10 2011, By ADRIAN SAINZ and MATT SEDENSKY , Associated Press



Flood waters claim an abandoned bus in Satartia, Miss., Monday, May 9, 2011. Residents and farmers along the Mississippi River and its tributaries race to secure their homes and businesses as much as possible from what is expected to be historic flooding. (AP Photo/Rogelio V. Solis)

(AP) -- The Mississippi River crested in Memphis at nearly 48 feet on Tuesday, falling inches short of its all-time record but still soaking low-lying areas with enough water to require a massive cleanup.

National Weather Service meteorologist Bill Borghoff says the river reached 47.85 feet at 2 a.m. CDT Tuesday and is expected to stay very close to that level for the next 24 to 36 hours. Hitting the high point means things shouldn't get worse in the area, but it will take weeks for the water to recede and much longer for inundated areas to recover.

"Pretty much the damage has been done," Borghoff said.

The crest is just shy of the record of 48.7 feet recorded during a devastating 1937 flood in Memphis.

The soaking was isolated to low-lying neighborhoods, and forced hundreds of people from their homes, but no new serious flooding was expected. Officials trusted the levees would hold and protect the city's world-famous musical landmarks, from Graceland to Beale Street.

"The levees are performing as designed I'm happy to report," Army Corps of Engineers Col. Vernie Reichling Jr. said Tuesday on CBS's "The Early Show."

Still, the corps' Memphis commander added: "I think we'll breathe a sigh of relief once this crest has passed and is in the Gulf of Mexico."

To the south, residents in the Mississippi Delta prepared for the worst. Farmers built homemade levees to protect their crops and engineers diverted water into a lake to ease the pressure levees around New Orleans. Inmates in the Louisiana's largest prison were also evacuated to higher ground.

Scott Haynes, 46, estimated he would spend more than \$80,000 on contractors to build levees around his house and grain silos, which hold 200,000 bushels of rice that he can't get out before the water comes. Heavy equipment has been mowing down his wheat fields to get to the dirt that is being used to build the levees, and he expected nearly all of his farmland to flood.

"That wheat is going to be gone, anyway," said Haynes, who lives in Carter, Miss., about 35 miles east of the Mississippi River. "We don't know if we're doing the right thing or not, but we can't not do it."

He knows time is not on his side. "I've got to get back on that dozer," he said, before walking away.

Nearby, Ed Jordan (pronounced JER'-din) pointed to a high-water mark of about 7 feet in the family's old general store left by the deadly flood of 1927. Floods have taken crops since then, but the Mississippi River hasn't swamped their homes in generations.

He was afraid it will happen this time.

"We have 400 acres of beautiful wheat that's almost ready for harvest. We have about a thousand acres of corn that's chest high and just waiting on a combine (to harvest it). That's going to be gone," Jordan said. "I don't know what is going to happen to our houses."

Similar scenes played out across the Mississippi Delta, the flatlands that stretch about 200 miles from Memphis to Vicksburg, Miss. Shelters were open and farmers were already applying for federal aid.

In Memphis, an NBA playoff game featuring the Memphis Grizzlies at the FedEx Forum downtown wasn't affected Monday night, but a barbecue contest this weekend is being moved to higher ground.

Other popular sites were also spared, including Sun Studio, where Elvis Presley made some of the recordings that helped him become king of rock 'n' roll and Stax Records, which launched the careers of Otis Redding and the Staple Singers.

Graceland, Presley's former estate several miles south of downtown, was in no danger either.

"I want to say this: Graceland is safe. And we would charge hell with a water pistol to keep it that way and I'd be willing to lead the charge,"

said Bob Nations Jr., director of the Shelby County Emergency Management Agency.

Talking about the river levels, he later added: "They're going to recede slowly, it's going to be rather putrid, it's going to be expensive to clean up, it's going to be labor-intensive."

Because of heavy rain over the past few weeks and snowmelt along the upper reaches of the Mississippi, the river has broken high-water records upstream and inundated low-lying towns and farmland. The water on the Mississippi is so high that the rivers and creeks that feed into it are backed up, and that has accounted for some of the worst of the flooding so far.

Because of the levees and other defenses built since the cataclysmic Great Flood of 1927 that killed hundreds of people, engineers say it is unlikely any major metropolitan areas will be inundated as the high water pushes downstream over the next week or so. Nonetheless, they are cautious because of the risk of levee failures, as shown during Hurricane Katrina in 2005.

In Louisiana, the Corps partially opened a spillway that diverts the Mississippi into a lake to ease pressure on the levees in greater New Orleans. As workers used cranes to remove some of the Bonnet Carre Spillway's wooden barriers, hundreds of people watched from the riverbank.

The spillway, which the Corps built about 30 miles upriver from New Orleans in response to the flood of 1927, was last opened in 2008. Monday marked the 10th time it has been opened since the structure was completed in 1931.

Rufus Harris Jr., 87, said his family moved to New Orleans in 1927 only

months after the disaster. He was too young to remember those days, but the stories he heard gave him respect for the river.

"People have a right to be concerned in this area because there's always a possibility of a levee having a defective spot," Harris said as he watched water rush out.

The Corps has also asked for permission to open a spillway north of Baton Rouge for the first time since 1973. Officials warned residents that even if it is opened, they can expect water 5 to 25 feet deep over parts of seven parishes. Some of Louisiana's most valuable farmland is expected to be inundated.

At the Louisiana State Penitentiary in Angola, home of the state's death row, officials started moving prisoners with medical problems to another prison as backwaters began to rise. The prisoners were moved in buses and vans under police escort.

The prison holds more than 5,000 inmates and is bordered on three sides by the Mississippi. The prison has not flooded since 1927, though prisoners have been evacuated from time to time when high water threatened, most recently in 1997.

©2011 The Associated Press. All rights reserved. This material may not be published, broadcast, rewritten or redistributed.

Citation: Mississippi crests in Memphis at nearly 48 feet (2011, May 10) retrieved 25 September 2023 from <https://phys.org/news/2011-05-nws-mississippi-river-crests-memphis.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.