

In Mississippi backwater, flood rises after weeks of waiting

March 12 2019, by Jeff Amy



As backflow waters flood home property and farm land along Mississippi 16 near Rolling Fork, Miss., some residents have taken to using small boats to reach their homes, Monday, March 11, 2019. This week the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), the Mississippi Emergency Management Agency (MEMA), along with select local emergency management offices will be conducting joint damage assessments in response to the severe storms and flooding are impacting the state. (AP Photo/Rogelio V. Solis)

For decades, Peggy Sellars and her husband George have warily watched

periodic floodwaters inundate the land around their home in the Mississippi Delta, but the dwelling always remained dry—until this year.

After weeks of fearful waiting, rising [water](#) finally got their house on Monday.

Two weeks ago, they had moved out of their residence east of Rolling Fork, correctly concluding the worst flooding since 1973 would overtop a small levee around their neighborhood. They returned twice a day to check things, worried about potential looters and the watery peril to their uninsured house.

Finally, a Monday afternoon boat ride showed the fate Peggy Sellars had feared.

"I'm devastated," she said. "The water is in my house."

The Sellars and the farmers who plant crops in the nearby Delta flatland are the latest victims of an unusual flood that involves flood-control structures.

Weeks of rainfall have fed high waters in the Mississippi River, which is lined with a levee that keeps those waters contained. Meanwhile, the Yazoo Backwater Levee also protects thousands of square miles from inundation that could back up the Yazoo River north of Vicksburg.

But the rain that swelled the Mississippi has also sent water rising between the backwater levee and the even taller levee along the Mississippi.

When water is low, the Big Sunflower River, the Little Sunflower River, Deer Creek and Steele Bayou exit the closed-in region through a floodgate along Steele Bayou, eventually reaching the Mississippi. But

when the Mississippi is high, the gate is closed to protect against even worse flooding and water backs up across the flat land of the Mississippi Delta. And every time it rains upstream, more water heads south.

This year, the Steele Bayou floodgate has been closed since Feb. 15. Sharkey County Supervisor Bill Newsom said residents began noticing the water rising out of the wooded swamps about 10 days later. Now, engineers say the region is on track for the worst flood since 1973, before the levee was completed. The water's steady, inch-by-inch rise is cutting off highways and isolating communities.

Without the backwater levee, the flood would actually be worse. But it's bad enough. Peter Nimrod, chief engineer of the Mississippi Levee Board, says the flood will cover at least 500,000 acres (200,000 hectares), swamping fields 60 miles (100 kilometers) or more to the north.

In the sparsely populated area, most homes remain dry for now. Newsom estimates about 50 families have moved out across Sharkey County. A Red Cross shelter in nearby Mayersville has no occupants.

But the big economic blow will fall on farmers. By the time things dry out, it will be too late to plant corn. It may still be possible to plant cotton, but farmers might be limited to a late planting of soybeans. Albert Dornbusch, who farms 5,000 acres with his son, said they'll probably limp by with the assistance of crop insurance payouts linked to their inability to plant, but he's not sure.

"Tell me when it goes down," Dornbusch said.

When the backwater levee was built, the plan was to pair it with giant pumps that would suck water out of the area, pushing it over the [levee](#) into a flooded Mississippi. But environmentalists fought the pumps for

decades, saying they would dry out and destroy wetlands dotting the region. They also argued the pumps, estimated to cost \$220 million, were too expensive and would mainly benefit farmers.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency vetoed the project in 2008. Advocates made a last-ditch attempt at getting Congress to mandate construction last year before U.S. Sen. Thad Cochran retired and left his powerful post as chairman of the Senate Appropriations Committee, but they failed.

Newsom remains an advocate of the pumps, saying agriculture is the region's only industry. He said he doesn't want to drain wetlands, just control high-water crests like the current one.

"We're just wanting to have a flood level we can live in," Newsom said.

But the water isn't done yet. Forecasters had predicted a brief but sharp drop in the Mississippi River later this month, which could have allowed the floodgate to reopen. That relief now appears unlikely, which could mean weeks more of the long, slow siege.

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers announced Monday it was releasing enough water into nearby Eagle Lake to raise already swollen levels by 4 feet (1.2 meters), aiming to prevent a flood-control structure from being undermined. The Mississippi Emergency Management Agency delivered 10,000 sandbags Monday to Sharkey County officials, and heavy rain is possible later this week.

Lance Lowrey, who lives near the Sellars, told Newsom on Monday that he's ready to evacuate with his daughter and two grandchildren. Water is beginning to submerge part of the state highway leading to Lowrey's home. That dwelling remains dry for now, but he relies on his truck to make it down his flooded driveway.

"I ain't got no boat," Lowrey said.

Standing in a cold, driving rain outside his front door, Lowrey said things are getting worse.

"It keeps raining," he said. "It's going to get deeper."

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