

Breaking News

Somber Sunday As State Flooding Death Toll Rises Tennessee State President Rescues Faculty Member In Flat Boat

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Dr. Melvin Johnson, the president of Tennessee State University, was thrust into the role of a hero Sunday morning. He and another faculty member frantically paddled a flat-bottomed boat through the flood waters swirling around the Nashville school's agricultural complex to rescue a third faculty member who had fallen prey to the state's worst flooding in years.

The death toll from the major storm reached 15, including 11 from Tennessee.

A large portion of downtown Nashville was underwater as the Cumberland River overflowed both banks and was set to be more than 11 feet above flood stage.

Guests at the Opryland Hotel had to be moved to a school after water got inside the luxury hotel and swamped cars in the parking lot.

Officials said a 62-mile section of I-40 west of Nashville was shut down due to the unprecedented flooding.

Dr. Johnson was called by university police on Sunday about 10:30 a.m. to be apprised of a drama that first unfolded when a concerned teacher went to try to save some stranded goats. The waters were rising so fast the man got stranded himself and was sitting atop a high hay stack when the university president got to him in the nick of time.

So while there is no telling what happened to TSU's "billies and nannies," the incident brought home the magnitude of the worst natural disaster to hit the state of Tennessee in years and, when the waters begin to recede this week, it is easy to see the horrific flooding in West and Middle Tennessee this weekend will cost the cash-strapped state millions upon millions of dollars.

How bad was it? Before Saturday the record in Nashville for a one-day rainfall was 6.8 inches, coming in the 1979 aftermath of Hurricane Frederick, but the National Weather Service announced shortly after 3 p.m. Sunday that 13.55 inches of rain had just fallen on the state capital in the same time period. The one-day total - all by itself - will make the entire month of May the wettest on record.

In Nashville 38,000 were without power by nightfall Sunday and, according to Governor Phil Bredesen, another 27,000 were without power in Memphis. There was no estimate how many were also without electricity in the rural area between Tennessee's two largest cities, but Interstate 40, which connects the two, was impassible in "at least six different places."

The same was true for I-24. It was submerged between Murfreesboro

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and Nashville so badly that when country singer Naomi Judd's buffalo herd bolted through the fences at her Leiper's Fork farm, all she could do was call a local TV station and shout, "They're on the loose."

Of course, West Tennessee was badly ravaged by flooding caused by a huge storm Saturday and another that followed Sunday morning. Press dispatches confirmed the Naval facility in Millington, flooded by five feet of water when a dam levee breached in two places, still had water "up to the windows" of many stranded cars.

Over 2,000 people had to be rescued and the Tennessee Emergency Management Agency was asking for the National Guard's help by mid-afternoon Sunday after the death toll had risen to eight. An elderly lady in the Pochantas community near Memphis was killed by a tornado, but the rest were flood-related deaths.

By mid-afternoon Sunday a formal "state of emergency" had been decreed in Memphis. What that means is that Interim Mayor Joe Ford has legally activated "all necessary support and resources to provide immediate aid to our towns, cities and response agencies."

Governor Bredesen, unable to ask for state-wide federal assistance until the rains cease and a thorough evaluation can begin, will doubtlessly do so on Monday because that is when the worst flooding will actually occur. In Nashville, for example, the Cumberland River's flood stage is 40 feet, but it is expected to crest at 48 feet. (At 55 feet, First Avenue in downtown Nashville will become flooded.)

There have been more than 600 swift-water rescues in Nashville during the last 36 hours and they continue. The power stations, many which help pump drinking water, cannot yet be repaired because those, too, are still under water.

The city of Franklin declared a 6 p.m. to 6 a.m. curfew and Nashville school superintendent Jesse Register, reporting that 23 schools had varying degrees of flooding, canceled school until further notice. Vanderbilt postponed its final exams and Vanderbilt Hospital, its basement beginning to fill, called off elective surgeries for Monday.

At Women's Hospital in Centennial there was three feet of water on the first floor, the airlines servicing Nashville were hurriedly canceling flights, and chaos still ruled in over half of Tennessee by nightfall Sunday.

At 7:30 Sunday night the second major storm was centered over the entire middle of the state. Officials in Chattanooga and Knoxville could only wait to see the result, but flood warnings are prominent for almost every county in the rain's path before bright sunshine is forecast statewide on Monday.

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