

Death Toll Rises In Tenn. As Floodwaters Recede

by NPR Staff and Wires



Rusty Russell/Getty Images

Michael Bunch wades on a flooded downtown sidewalk Monday in Nashville. More than 13 inches of rainfall fell over two days, more than doubling the previous record of 6.68 inches and leaving at least 18 dead in the state and thousands displaced.

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Rescuers feared even more bodies would emerge as muddy floodwaters ebb from torrential weekend rains that swamped Nashville, much of Tennessee and two neighboring states, leaving at least 29 dead.

The Cumberland River that has submerged parts of Nashville's historic downtown was expected to start receding Tuesday after being swollen by flash floods in creeks that feed into it.

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Flooded Cumberland River Crests In Nashville

Residents and authorities know they'll find widespread property damage in inundated areas, but dread even more devastating discoveries.

"Those in houses that have been flooded and some of those more remote areas, do we suspect we will find more people? Probably so," Nashville Fire Chief Kim Lawson said. "We certainly hope that it's not a large number."

Rescue And Recovery

Thousands of people have fled the rising water and hundreds have been rescued, but bodies were recovered Monday from homes, a yard, even a wooded area outside a Nashville supermarket.

An elderly man and his wife apparently were on their way to church when their car was swept away; they were found late Monday in the floodwaters behind a grocery store, reported Blake Farmer of member station WPLN.

By then, the rapidly rising waters were blamed in the deaths of 18 people in Tennessee alone, including 10 in Nashville.

The weekend storms also killed six people in Mississippi and four in Kentucky, including one man whose truck ran off the road and into a flooded creek. One person was killed by a tornado in western Tennessee.

Brian Copeland wrote, "Every bed and guest room in our house was full last night with people who were flooded out of their neighborhoods. One of the 'guests' witnessed a death on a local grocery store's sidewalk. An emotional Sunday."

Businesses along Nashville's riverfront lost electricity early Tuesday. Laurie Parker, a spokeswoman for Nashville Electric Service, said a main circuit failed before dawn, knocking out power to many downtown businesses, including the 33-story AT&T Building and a Hilton hotel.

The flooding also prompted election officials to delay the city's local primary, which had been set for Tuesday.

Restaurant and bars clustered on a downtown street remained closed because of the power outage. Bar manager Susan Zoesch said the closure would be hardest on servers who rely on tips.

"We're trying to figure out what we can do for them if we're going to be shut down for a while," Zoesch said.

Andy Mason, the concierge at a high-rise building of condominiums, said he was been advising residents to leave the 330-unit building because power wasn't expected to be restored for three days.

Downtown Nashville Swamped

The water had deluged some of the city's most important revenue sources: the Gaylord Opryland Hotel and Convention Center, whose 1,500 guests were whisked to a shelter; the adjacent Opry Mills Mall; even the Grand Ole Opry House, considered by many to be the heart of country music.

"That's the hub of the whole deal down here," 82-year-old businessman John Hobbs said of the entertainment complex. "Without them, nobody would be down here. That's like the star of the whole family."

Floodwaters also edged into areas of downtown, damaging the Country Music Hall of Fame, LP Field where the Tennessee Titans play, and the Bridgestone Arena, home to the NHL's Nashville Predators and one of the city's main concert venues.

At Big River Grill in downtown Nashville, David Ellis has spent two days trying to pump out the cellar, where water from the Cumberland River has been flowing in faster than it's been going out.



John Partipilo/AP Photo/The Tennessean

Water floods the inside of the Opryland Hotel on Monday, northeast of downtown Nashville. All of the 1,500 guests were evacuated overnight. The Cumberland River spilled onto streets near the riverfront, and restaurants and bars in the tourist district are closed.

"The basement is done — it's toast right now," Ellis told WPLN's Farmer. "The switchgear, electrical gear, it's all underwater."

Carly Horvat, 29, lives in a downtown condo and ventured out with a few friends to look at damage Monday night.

"I have never heard the city so quiet," Horvat said. "Usually, you hear whooping and hollering from Broadway."

State Declares Disaster Areas

Damage estimates range into the tens of millions of dollars. Gov. Phil Bredesen declared 52 of Tennessee's 95 counties disaster areas after finishing an aerial tour from Nashville to western Tennessee during which he saw flooding so extensive that treetops looked like islands.

The severity of the storms caught everyone off guard. More than 13.5 inches of rainfall were recorded Saturday and Sunday, according to the National Weather Service, making for a new two-day record that doubled the previous mark.

Dramatic rescues continued into Monday as water crept into areas that had remained safe during weekend downpours.

Authorities and volunteers in fishing boats, an amphibious tour bus and a canoe scooped up about 500 trapped vacationers at the Wyndham Resort along the river near Opryland. Rescuers had to steer through a maze of underwater hazards, including submerged cars, some with tops barely visible above floodwaters the color of milk chocolate.

Bill Crouser was riding his Jet Ski past a neighbor's house when he rescued a man, his wife and their dog moments before flames from a fire in the garage broke through the roof.

"We just got the hell out of there," Crouser said.

'I Think I've Lost Everything'

Survivors are regrouping at Red Cross shelters, including one set up at the Gordon Jewish Community Center. Volunteers have been feeding evacuees like 80-year-old Fay Harper, who left her house Sunday in a canoe, Farmer reported Tuesday on *Morning Edition*.

"My neighbor across the street knocked on the door and said, 'You've got to get out.' I didn't even know. I think I've lost everything," Harper said.

The water swelled most of the area's lakes, minor rivers, creeks, streams and drainage systems far beyond capacity. It flowed with such force that bridges were washed out and thousands of homes were damaged. Much of that water then drained into the Cumberland, which snakes through Nashville.

The Cumberland topped out around 6 p.m. Monday at 51.9 feet, about 12 feet above flood stage and the highest it's reached since 1937. It began to recede just in time to spare the city's only remaining water treatment plant.

Still, about 50 Nashville schools were damaged and floodwaters submerged hundreds of homes in the Bellevue suburb alone, including Lisa Blackmon's. She escaped with her dog and her car but feared she lost everything else.

"I know God doesn't give us more than we can take," said Blackmon, 45, who lost her job at a trucking company in December. "But I'm at my breaking point."