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Cumberland River recedes as Tennessee cleans up

By the CNN Wire Staff

STORY HIGHLIGHTS

- Cumberland River begins to recede in Nashville
- Flooding leads to at least 28 deaths across the Southeast -- 19 in Tennessee
- Music City institutions among buildings flooded
- Naval facility outside Memphis hit by floodwaters

(CNN) -- The Cumberland River in Tennessee was receding Tuesday as favorable weather was in the forecast, bringing some relief to the flood-battered state.

Severe weather over the weekend was blamed for at least 28 deaths across the Southeast -- 19 of those in Tennessee -- between Saturday and Monday, emergency officials said. Ten of the Tennessee deaths occurred in Nashville and surrounding Davidson County, the Nashville mayor's office said.

President Obama on Tuesday named parts of Tennessee major disaster areas.

The designation makes federal funding available to affected residents in the counties of Cheatham, Davidson, Hickman and Williamson, according to the White House.

The Cumberland River crested Monday evening at 51.9 feet, 11.9 feet above flood stage, National Weather Service Meteorologist Sam Herron said.

"It's going to continue dropping through today," he said.

The National Weather Service expects the river to fall below flood stage by Thursday morning. The water should recede enough to leave the downtown Nashville area by Tuesday night, Herron said.

"Conditions are going to improve from this point out," he said.

In western Tennessee, significant flash flooding swamped a U.S. Navy base and affected a large part of its operations, a base spokesman said Tuesday.

Water rushed into base housing and several other buildings at Naval Support Activity Mid-South in Millington, Tennessee, less than 20 miles from Memphis.

Base officials shut all the affected buildings to limit long-term damage.

On the website for the base, a message from the commanding officer announced, "For Tuesday, May 4, only those personnel directly involved in recovery efforts need to report to work. All other personnel should check in with their chains of command."

Some buildings were undamaged, but some communication systems remained down.

Vice Adm. Mark Ferguson said engineers had assessed some of the residential streets and determined that some homes are safe for sailors and their families to return.

Those residents can go only to and from their homes; the rest of the base is still closed and considered unsafe. No visitors were being allowed on base.

At Tennessee State University, which sits on the banks of the Cumberland River, the university's president was involved in the rescue of a faculty member.

Using a boat, President Melvin Johnson and a graduate student were able to rescue a professor who had been stranded by flash flooding on Sunday.

Johnson said he got the faculty member, who was suffering from hypothermia, to a hospital.

Officials at the state and local level responded well to the flooding, but "this tragedy was so widespread that we couldn't wait on the emergency response teams to our campus," Johnson said.

Tennessee State wasn't the only Nashville university affected.

According to the Vanderbilt University website, exams were canceled on Monday. As of Tuesday, things were getting back to normal, the website said. "We still have numerous cleanup and restoration efforts going on across campus," said Mark Petty, assistant vice chancellor for Plant Operations.

Chris McDonald shot video of streets covered by water around the university that he submitted as a CNN iReport.

"It was just shocking to see the extent of the flooding. We had been hearing about it, but seeing it for myself was a whole different perspective," he said.

In a news conference Tuesday, Nashville Mayor Karl Dean praised the high number of residents who had volunteered to help those affected by the flooding.

The city was soliciting donations of large quantities of diapers, formula, cleaning supplies, brooms, mops and generators, the mayor said.

"We are now officially beginning to transition from the response to the recovery stage of this disaster," he said.

"We are looking at a long recovery period," the mayor said, adding that he believed that Nashville would recover completely from the flood damage.

This was a "500-year flood," said Larry Nash, spokesman for the Army Corps of Engineers.

Part of the reason the river was receding at a slow pace was because the Corps of Engineers were strategically releasing some water upstream from some dams.

[Map: iReporters document flooding](#)

The releases were necessary for the dams and actually stemmed flooding down river, Lt. Col. Anthony Mitchell, commander of the Corps' Nashville District, said in a statement.

"The perception is that flooding along the Cumberland River was made worse by releases from Corps dams," he said. "The truth is that Corps dams kept the flooding throughout the region from being much worse."

There were also questions about how Nashville would be economically affected by the flooding.

[iReport: Have you been affected by the flooding? Send photos, video](#)

The CMA Music Festival, one of Nashville's signature music events, will continue as planned in June, organizers said.

The music festival brings in more than \$22 million in direct visitor spending to Nashville, Country Music Association board chairman Steve Moore said.

"We cannot think of a better way to help our local economy at this time of great need than to continue the 39-year tradition of CMA Music Festival," he said.

[CNN affiliate WKRN-TV: Recovery efforts expand](#)

Country music artist Keith Urban told CNN's Rick Sanchez that his road equipment was likely lost as a result of the [flooding](#).

He may have lost his equipment, but "this pales in comparison to people who have lost homes and everything," Urban said.

"Nashville is just such a great community and that community spirit has never been more evident than it is now," he said, predicting that benefit concerts in the music-rich city may help raise funds to restore it.

CNN's Chris Lawrence, Martin Savidge and Mariano Castillo contributed to this report.

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