

State of emergency declared in Maryland suburb after record-breaking flooding kills two

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Vehicles were overturned and homes were ripped from their foundations in the historic Baltimore/Washington, D.C. suburb of Ellicott City this weekend when a fast-moving storm system dumped more than 165 millimeters of rain in Maryland in the span of two hours. The torrent caused the deaths of two motorists. Describing it as a devastating situation, Maryland's Republican Governor Larry Hogan declared a state of emergency on Sunday.

A 35-year-old mother, Jessica Watsula, and 38-year-old father of three, Joseph Anthony Blevins, were both killed when their vehicles were struck by shoulder-deep floodwaters, carrying them off. Both Blevin's and Watsula's bodies were found in the early morning hours Sunday after having been washed ashore near the Patapsco River, adjacent to Ellicott City.

"It looks like the set of a disaster movie...Cars everywhere, cars on top of cars, parts of the road are gone, many parts of the sidewalk are gone, storefronts are completely gone," said Howard County Executive Allan Kittleman of the devastation caused by the storm. On Monday, Kittleman toured the destroyed downtown area, stating that it would require "months, if not years" to rebuild the city.

In addition, traffic and transportation ground to a halt in the heavily populated Washington, D.C.-Baltimore area, leaving many airline passengers stranded without transit. Flash floods were also reported in Wayne, New Jersey, and a flash flood watch was issued for parts of Pennsylvania and central and northern New Jersey.

Many were faced with drowning, with over 120 swift-water rescues reported in the region during the storm. Four homes were completely destroyed and between 20 and 30 more were damaged by the floodwaters.

Ellicott City is prone to flooding as it is positioned at the foot of the Tiber and Patapsco Rivers in eastern/central Maryland. The unincorporated suburb with a population of roughly 65,000, has seen numerous floods since its inception, including an 1868 disaster which claimed the lives of at least 39 people. The town is ranked among the most affluent in the United States.

The storm is being called a "1-in-a-1,000-year rain event" by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. The majority of the 6.5 inches of rainfall that struck the mid-Atlantic region occurred in less than 90 minutes. This is over 1.5 times the state's yearly average for the entire month of July.

Since 2010, at least nine "1-in-a-1,000-year" weather events have occurred in the United States. Last month, NASA scientists released data showing that the first half of 2016 had been the hottest year on record, the level of heat surpassing 2015, the previous record-holder. In an interview with the *New York Times*, Gavin Schmidt of NASA's Goddard Institute of Space Studies stated that world temperatures for 2016 were "dancing" with the limit set for heat emission at the Paris climate summit this past year.

Maryland has seen similar levels of precipitation before the most recent flooding. Speaking to the *Baltimore Sun* in 2014, Howard County stormwater manager Jim Caldwell stated "I think that the depth of the challenge is kind of defined by the fact that if somebody wanted to build Ellicott City today, you couldn't do it."

While efforts to rebuild the region will draw heavily from state and federal aid, the required funds to protect state and local infrastructure are being depleted. Since

2010, the Obama administration has cut the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's water infrastructure spending by over \$2 billion.

In addition, budget cuts affecting public safety at the state level have been mounting, with the governor proposing a 2 percent across-the-board cut for all agencies in the most recent state budget. "The reality of our financial situation requires us to find ways to work together in order to curb long term spending and protect the interests of taxpayers," said State Budget and Management Secretary David R. Brinkley in a letter to state legislators earlier this year.



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