

Monsoon rains cause flooding in Nevada, leave 70,000 people stranded at Burning Man festival

Alex Findijs
4 September 2023

Intense monsoon rains struck much of Nevada over the weekend causing flash floods and the closure of highways. The town of Primm, Nevada, near the border with California recorded three inches of rain in just two hours on Saturday, while the National Weather Service (NWS) recorded 0.88 inches of rain in Las Vegas on Friday. This was three times the average monthly total for September in Las Vegas, and Harry Reid International Airport has reported nearly four inches of rain in total for this year's monsoon season so far.

The intense rain flooded roads throughout Las Vegas, prompting the NWS to issue a warning for people to stay off the roads. "Throw that frozen pizza in the oven for dinner," NWS Las Vegas said. "Please do not put food delivery drivers (& local first responders by extension) at risk."

The National Parks Service also closed the Navajo Trail Loop on Sunday, and heavy rainfall caused mud and rock slides over the weekend in Bryce Canyon National Park. Meanwhile, intense flooding along Interstate 15 forced a temporary closure of the road by 6:00 p.m. Pacific Time on Saturday. The highway reopened northbound lanes by 8:00 p.m. and southbound lanes several hours later around 1:00 a.m. on Sunday.

One person has reportedly died during the storms this weekend at the Burning Man festival hosted in the Black Rock Desert 110 miles north of Reno, Nevada. The identity or cause of death of the individual have not been reported by local officials, and an investigation is ongoing.

Monsoon rains have left tens of thousands of people at the annual desert campout festival stranded with all traffic in and out of the site barred for much of the

weekend. Roughly 70,000 people were stuck at the site with no reliable travel in or out.

An estimated half-inch of rain fell on the dry lake bed where the festival is held. Attendees have reported that the rains turned the desert into a dense mud nearly one-foot deep, making it difficult for people to walk around and virtually impossible for vehicles to move.

Organizers issued a "shelter in place" advisory and told attendees to conserve on food, water and fuel.

A major concern for those stranded was the lack of toilet services caused by the rain. Held deep in the Nevada desert, the only toilet facilities available are portable toilets that are typically emptied by trucks several times a day. With no vehicles able to enter or leave it was possible that the portable toilets could overflow and cause a significant health hazard. According to the Associated Press some attendees reported that sanitation vehicles were able to begin entering on Sunday after the storms had passed.

Another concern was that attendees would not have sufficient supplies. Most people at Burning Man bring enough supplies to support themselves during the weeklong event that began on August 27 and was scheduled to end on Monday. Had conditions not improved enough to allow people to leave, the lack of infrastructure on the site could have caused a humanitarian crisis, with tens of thousands of people without proper water, food, sanitary or medical supplies.

A miles-long convoy of vehicles was reported to be moving out of the site Monday morning with the mud drying enough to allow for vehicles to make progress out of the desert. But organizers for the event said Monday morning that the Gate Road remained too

muddy for most vehicles to leave. By Monday afternoon conditions had improved enough to lift the driving ban and for vehicles to begin exiting.

The torrential rains that have struck Nevada are the product of strong monsoon conditions fueled by capitalist-induced climate change and the recently developed El Niño in the Pacific Ocean. El Niño is the warming cycle in the El Niño Southern Oscillation. During the El Niño years, warm water currents move to the surface off of the western coast of the Americas at the equator. This warm water current shifts global weather patterns leading to wetter than average conditions in the South and Southwestern parts of the United States and drier than usual conditions in much of Southeast Asia and Africa.

This year's El Niño comes on the back of a three-year-long La Niña, the cooler cycle of the Southern Oscillation. While technically the cooler portion of the cycle, the past three years have been some of the hottest ever recorded around the world. Much of this energy was stored in the ocean where it is now reemerging to the surface under El Niño conditions.

As the Pacific Ocean warms, it will release a considerable amount of energy and moisture into the atmosphere where it will be directed by regional weather patterns, such as the monsoon winds of the American Southwest, to drop abnormal amounts of rainfall. Meanwhile, other parts of the globe will see significantly less rainfall, contributing to drought conditions and worsening food shortages that have affected many of the world's poorest regions. This will further compound issues caused by the disruption of grain shipments from the US-NATO war against Russia in Ukraine.

Dillon Amaya, a research scientist at NOAA, told Vox, “[El Niño] creates a lot of convection and a lot of thunderstorms in a part of the world that doesn't always have that activity. You release a lot of energy and a lot of heat into the atmosphere and this creates waves that propagate in the Northern Hemisphere and in the Southern Hemisphere symmetrically.”

El Niño years fluctuate in strength, but scientists are expecting that climate change will exacerbate the conditions caused by El Niño around the world. A recent study published in *Science* estimates that the El Niño of 1997-98, one of the strongest on record, caused \$5.7 trillion in income loss from extreme weather

events. Based on extensive warming of the planet since then, the researchers expect that damage from El Niño events could reach up to \$84 trillion by the end of the century.

As the planet continues to warm from human-caused climate change, extreme weather events will only become more common. According to climate scientist Zeke Hausfather, 2023 has an 85 percent chance of being the hottest year on record. July of this year was recorded as the hottest July ever recorded, at 2.7 degrees Fahrenheit above the preindustrial average, and El Niño will only add additional energy to the global climate system.

As industries continue to pump greenhouse gasses into the atmosphere, climate change will only continue to worsen. With a warmer average climate, there is more energy around the globe to create extreme weather events that threaten human life. The 1998 El Niño event is estimated to have contributed to the deaths of 23,000 people worldwide who were killed by storms and flooding made stronger by its energy.

With capitalist industries and governments around the world incapable of taking the necessary action to combat climate change, the conditions for even stronger patterns of extreme weather events will only intensify. Confronting climate change and its effects requires the intervention of the international working class on to reorganize global society on a socialist basis.



To contact the WSW and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact