

MINOT FLOOD:

Souris threat makes another leap upward

Minot braces for even higher flooding levels

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By: Tu-Uyen Tran, Grand Forks Herald

- [Souris river bridge](#)



High flood waters from the Souris river run over a bridge in Minot, ND on June 23, 2011. (CHRISTIAN RANDOLPH/Grand Forks Herald)

- [Souris River flooding in Minot - June 23, 2011](#)
- [Live broadcast feed from KXMC / KXMD Live Weather Channel on Ustream.com](#)
- [VIDEO: Aerial flood images in Minot area Thursday from Black Hawk helicopter](#)
- [Click here for more coverage of Minot and the Souris River flood on GrandForksHerald.com](#)

MINOT — The 2011 Souris River flood here, already predicted to be the biggest in recorded history, was predicted Thursday to get even bigger.

At the start of the week, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers had expected about 9,700 cubic feet per second of water to flow through Minot, while the National Weather Service expected the river would crest 1,555.1 feet above sea level midweek.

According to the latest estimate, there will be some 29,000 cfs moving through by Saturday and the crest will actually be 1,564.5 feet early Sunday morning. That's an increase of 9 feet in just a few days.

Mayor Curt Zimbelman expressed some fear there won't be enough time to build up dikes to protect the approaches to the Broadway bridge, which was temporarily closed Thursday afternoon, the one remaining connection between the two halves of the city bisected by the river. "Work will continue until we can no longer hold back the water," he promised.

Minot is the state's fourth largest city with a population of 41,000. On Wednesday, when the emergency sirens sounded, 11,000 of the residents were ordered to evacuate the river valley.

How could the predictions have been so far off? That, predictably, was the big question when state and federal officials faced the press for another afternoon briefing on Thursday. Reporter after reporter asked different variations of that question.

It's a critical question because many of the evacuees had been working under the assumption that floodwaters wouldn't reach the second floor of their homes. Accordingly, they'd moved their belongings there for safekeeping. Now, their hopes may be dashed. The city is now advising residents who live just outside of the evacuation zone — on higher ground — to move their belongings to the second floor.

Inevitable

Lt. Col. Kendall Bergmann, head of the corps' St. Paul District, said he is well aware of everyone's frustration. But even if he knew then what he knows now, he said, he would still be helpless to lessen the flood level. The corps controls a dam upstream at Lake Darling and works with Canadian partners who control three more reservoirs upstream in Saskatchewan, he said, and all the reservoirs are maxed out and the water must be released.

"I could release the entire amount of Lake Darling out of it, and let's say I could do it without affecting Minot, and I close the gates to protect Minot from the crest that's coming down, the lake would fill up in less than one day, but the water would not stop," he said.

Blame it on the rain, he and Steve Buan, a hydrologist with the weather service's North Central River Forecast Center in Chanhassen, Minn.

Saskatchewan, the source of the Souris River, has seen record rains from the beginning of May to the middle of June, saturating the soil so it can't hold much more water, Buan said. The projections had accounted for all that, he said. What

they hadn't accounted for was 4 to 6 inches of rain falling over a broad area earlier this week, he said.

Bergmann drew a rough map of the river basin to illustrate the point. If 4 to 6 inches had fallen in this small area over one of the reservoirs, the others could take up the slack, he told the Herald, drawing a small circle. Instead, it fell over several of the reservoirs, he said, drawing a larger circle over them all. There's flooding downstream of the reservoirs in Canada, too, he said.

Compounding the problem is the reservoirs are already straining, he said, so when they must release their water, that flow is joined by water draining from the rest of the basin downstream, adding up to an enormous volume of water.

In short, this may be a flood that's too big for the reservoir system to contain.

"Everything is full and there's no where to put it," Bergmann said.

Why so late? But why couldn't federal officials say that sooner?

Data is hard to come by, Buan told the Herald. There are few residents on the sparsely populated south Saskatchewan plains, and, consequently, few observers to gauge rainfall, he said.

"I don't know what's going on in every square inch of the environment," Bergmann said. He doesn't know the exact absorption rate of the soil or the exact evaporation rate or what holes the water may go into, he said, "that's why there are estimates."

The coming fight

In the meantime, other agencies are scrambling to fight the flood as best they can.

The National Guard had 450 soldiers and airmen in the area Wednesday, but by Friday it will have 750, said Maj. Gen. David Sprynczynatyk, the guards' adjutant general. He's also in conversation with Minot Air Force Base about possibly having its airmen assist in the flood fight, he said.

Every state agency is engaged, Gov. Jack Dalrymple said, most significantly the Department of Transportation, which is moving 100,000 sandbags, sandbag machines and pumps from Bismarck to Minot. Road closures are anticipated, he

said, but the department will work on detours with the goal of preventing any area from being completely cut off.

The North Dakota Legislature is slated for a special session in November to address redistricting and other state issues.

Dalrymple told Forum Communications on Thursday he does not now foresee needing to call a special session earlier to discuss flood issues.

The state has emergency fund appropriations and can turn to the Bank of North Dakota for funds for match purposes, he said. “The Legislature has set up a very good contingency system for us to access emergency funds,” he said.

The good news is Minot has ditched plans to enlarge the evacuation zone. Mayor Zimbelman said when the crest hits, the water will reach the steep hills on each side of the river and an increase in the water level wouldn’t really affect many more residents. The city simply advises that they get out, he said, but it’s up to them.

The mayor ended the press briefing on an upbeat note, but his tone sounded grim: “I ask the citizens of Minot to stay strong and we’ll get through this.”

Teri Finneman of Forum Communications contributed to this report.