

## Flooding wreaks havoc along Mississippi River, a transit hub for \$1 billion in goods



The US Army Corps of Engineers Service Base in St. Louis on Monday. (Nick Schnelle/For The Washington Post)

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ST. LOUIS — Soybean farmer Robb Ewoldt was already suffering from the floods and low commodity prices that have plagued the Midwest this year when Mother Nature delivered another punch.

With the Mississippi River rising to one of the highest levels since 1993, the U.S. Coast Guard shut down a five-mile stretch in St. Louis on Friday — cutting off a major commercial artery for Midwest farmers and other industries.

Ewoldt has about \$75,000 in soybeans sitting in grain bins with nowhere to go.

“We have no barge traffic coming, and we won’t be able to move whatever is at St. Louis or below,” said Ewoldt, a farmer from Davenport, Iowa, where several blocks of downtown flooded last week as the Mississippi River crested there.

“It’s all one perfect storm between the tariffs and all the flooding and all the rain we’ve had that’s causing planting delays right now,” he said. “There are a lot of things going on that are kicking producers in the mouth.”

The closure is the latest hit for a river system plagued by prolonged flooding that has created havoc along its banks and brought shipping of farm and energy and other products in some states to a grinding halt.

*[Amid bigger and more frequent floods, a city in Iowa debates how to 'make peace' with the Mississippi]*

Record flooding in the upper Midwest, as a result of rapid snow melt and spring rain, has already caused an estimated \$12 billion in damage this year, according to an estimate from AccuWeather, flooding homes and businesses, drowning cattle and other livestock and displacing hundreds of people, authorities have said.

Some shippers and barge captains are preparing for the eventuality that the Mississippi won't be fully reopened until June, according to Debra A. Calhoun of the Waterways Council, a trade group.

“These aren't the highest crests on record, but this period of high water across the Missouri, Mississippi and Illinois River basins has been historically long with an end that is still weeks away,” said Capt. Scott Stoermer, commander of the U.S. Coast Guard's Upper Mississippi River sector, who issued the command to close the river. The decision was made based on the elevated height of the river and came just hours after a towboat collided with a downtown bridge, damaging its pilot house.



From left, Clint Dougherty and Kyle Arentsen of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers check the integrity of a panel closure of a flood wall just south of the Gateway Arch in St. Louis on Monday. (Nick Schnelle/For The Washington Post)

Little relief is in sight with rain in the forecast, according to the National Weather Service. Authorities on Monday said this stretch will remain shut down during high-water conditions, as floodwaters surged, overtopping a levee in the St. Charles area and forcing evacuations just north

of St. Louis. Another levee broke in Missouri's Pike County, and several smaller rural levees were overtopped on Monday.

At least four people have died during the most recent bout of flooding, authorities have said.

In mid-March, a "bomb cyclone" unleashed heaps of snow and rain over frozen ground, pushing the Missouri River and its tributaries over their banks, which broke dozens of levees, swept away three Nebraska bridges, displaced thousands and left three dead. In recent days, as excessive rain continues, the Mississippi River to the east rose to record heights — at 22.7 feet Thursday in Davenport, beating the previous record set during historic floods in 1993.

The St. Louis closure is the most recent curtailment of the mighty 2,320-mile-long river, which begins in the cool springs of Minnesota, ends in the Gulf of Mexico and served as a transit way for more than 1.78 billion in goods last year, including soybeans, corn, crude oil and coal, according to the Army Corps of Engineers. Some frozen parts of the river in Minnesota were never opened for spring because of flooding. Locks, devices used for raising and lowering watercraft, on many other stretches in Iowa and Illinois have been shut since March.

*[‘A punch in the gut’: Farmers hit by tariffs see crops swept away by flood]*

The recent river closure has had a harsh impact on industries, compounding the effects of the lock closures to the north. St. Louis, at the confluence of the Mississippi, Missouri and Illinois rivers, has evolved into a transportation hub and major loading point for grain and other goods. Groups of barges arriving from the north or south are often reconfigured here for their onward journeys along the different river systems.

“It disrupts commerce,” said Butler Miller, who operates Robert B. Miller & Associates, a small company of 200 barges. Miller said of the river closure: “St. Louis is a big loading point. Now you can’t even load anymore.”

He continued, “If you are a farmer in Iowa, Minnesota or Illinois getting grain to New Orleans, you are really stuck.”



Barges sit on the side of the Mississippi River just south of the Gateway Arch in St. Louis on Monday. (Nick Schnelle/For The Washington Post)

Monday at the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers service base, on a usually busy stretch of river just south of the closure, a couple of tugboats were servicing stationary barges, anchored either to the shore or to the riverbed in giant parking lots known as fleeting areas. On a typical day here, as many as three towboats pass every few minutes pushing along huge formations of barges. But there was no through traffic Monday.

Instead, water swirled around giant grain silos that stood idle on the opposite bank, and Coast Guard members busied themselves with maintenance.

Last week, the Coast Guard deployed small boats in Davenport after a temporary flood barrier failed there, ferrying people and their pets from flooded apartment buildings to dry land. Such a move would be impossible in the fast-flowing current in St Louis.

“We’re not sure how we would get a boat into the water right now,” said Eric Harrison, a Coast Guard officer.

Josh VerDught and two colleagues from the Army Corps of Engineers did their daily patrol of the giant graffiti-decorated flood wall that protects downtown St. Louis, searching for any spots where the water might be undermining the wall.

They stopped in front of temporary barricades put up where roads usually pass through the wall to allow barge operators access to their floating cargo carriers.

A graffiti artist had spray-painted the “Road Closed” sign. In its place was another, more telling handwritten message as the long springtime of high water threatens to continue into summer.

“Practice patience,” it read.

Gowen reported from Washington.