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In Mississippi Delta, All Eyes on a Swelling River

By CAMPBELL ROBERTSON

CLEVELAND, Miss. — For 76 years, the bankers, catfish farmers, and corn and soybean growers who make up the [Delta Council](#) have gathered to talk crops and politics, and listen to speeches by governors, senators and, on one occasion, William Faulkner.

The regular crowd was no different on Friday morning, full of seersucker and smiling politicians, but the conversation was overwhelmed by one topic.

“Water can be a wonderful and dangerous thing,” said Albert Santa Cruz, the state public safety commissioner. “If it’s coming, get out. And it’s coming.”

All eyes in the delta are on the Mississippi River and the bulge of water it is carrying southward, pushing back its tributaries into the towns along its banks, sending residents scattering toward higher ground and setting records all along the way.

“This is historic,” said Col. Jeffrey R. Eckstein, commander of the [Vicksburg District of the Army Corps of Engineers](#), who became the day’s keynote speaker at the last minute. “Things that have never happened, people here have never seen before, we are going to see.”

Officials have already spent days fighting back the White River in Arkansas, where there have been two deaths and hundreds of homes have flooded. Hundreds of residents are being urged to evacuate certain areas in and around Memphis, where tributaries have swelled into parts of the city as well as suburbs and mobile home parks and inundated a small airport.

The river is still a couple of weeks away from cresting in the delta, but experts are predicting all-time records here. As it bulges past Natchez around May 22, it is projected to be several feet above the height it reached in 1927, when the river broke its banks, flooded 27,000 square miles, killed hundreds and displaced thousands.

The flood-control system that arose in the wake of that flood has never been put to such a test.

“It will be pressured, there’s no question,” said John M. Barry, the author of “Rising Tide: The Great Mississippi Flood of 1927 and How It Changed America.” “That’s about as close to the design capacity as I care to get.”

Unlike in the 1927 flood, the **levees** along the Mississippi are not causing the greatest concern, officials and river watchers say. The anxiety is in the backwater, the tributaries that are carrying water from the heavy rains down to the Mississippi. The river is not only too high to take any more water, but is also pushing its own water up into the tributaries — and wherever else it can go.

That is what has happened in Arkansas, where the White River, fattened from weeks of heavy rains, has forced the evacuation of towns along its course and the closing a stretch of busy Interstate 40 between Little Rock and Memphis.

On Saturday night, the White River’s crest will be passing the little town of Des Arc, Ark., where a man has already been found dead. While the river is not expected to spill over the levees, said Davis Bell, the spokesman for the Prairie County emergency management agency, “it will be absolutely at the very tip top.”

The engorged river is still several days away from cresting in Memphis but has already prompted the

authorities to go door to door in areas that are likely to be affected, urging hundreds of residents to move to higher ground. Bob Nations, the director of the Shelby County Office of Preparedness, estimated that 3,000 homes and businesses would eventually be affected by the floodwaters.

Meanwhile, those in the lower Mississippi Delta have been watching uneasily, as, in the phrasing of Gov. [Haley Barbour](#), the pig comes down the python.

All but one of the 18 casinos along the river in Mississippi will be closed by early next week.

Evacuations have already begun in certain areas along the river and shelters have begun to open for the several thousand individuals the state expects will need a place to stay. Mr. Barbour himself spent last weekend taking the furniture out of his lake house, which he estimated would take in 10 feet of water.

The anxiety here in the delta is concentrated on the Yazoo River, which forms the eastern border of the delta before joining the Mississippi just north of Vicksburg.

As the crest creeps past Vicksburg around May 20, the Yazoo backwater will begin topping its levees by a foot or more in the flat farmland of the lower delta and pouring into an area just west of Yazoo City, where levees have not yet been built. The overtopping of the backwater levee is by design, to relieve pressure. But there and farther up the Yazoo River, the flooding will cover hundreds of thousands of acres of farmland, swallowing soybean and corn fields, submerging highways and pouring into homes.

Andy Prosser, the public relations director of the Mississippi Department of Agriculture and Commerce, said that he expected more than 500,000 acres of cropland to be flooded throughout the delta if current projections hold. As for the total number of acres inundated, including cropland, forest and even towns, “we’re looking at over a million,” Mr. Prosser said.

The nagging questions in the delta are whether heavy rains could come in and compound the flooding over the next month, and whether the backwater levee, sitting underwater, can keep from giving way. The corps is using plastic to protect the portion of the levee that will be overtopped, but a breach is “a

definite possibility,” said Peter Nimrod, the chief engineer for the Mississippi Levee Board.

“If the levee fails,” Mr. Nimrod said, “then all of a sudden, you get towns underwater.”

On the evening before the Delta Council meeting, about 150 people sat quietly in the gymnasium at South Delta Elementary School in the little town of Rolling Fork.

This town, which bills itself as the birthplace of Muddy Waters as well as the teddy bear, sits snugly in the arrowhead formed by the Mississippi and Yazoo Rivers. When the backwater levees are exceeded, Rolling Fork will remain dry, though cut off from Vicksburg — if the levee holds, that is.

“The key word here,” said Katherine Tankson, the superintendent of education for the county, “is make sure that you’re all praying.”

Old-time religion was good enough for many at the meeting. They said they were praying, and therefore not panicking. God has long looked after the town, they said.

But this was not good enough, on its own, for everyone.

“You got to pray,” said Sylvia White, a 52-year-old homemaker. “But you got to have a little common sense, too. That water’s got to go somewhere.”

John Schwartz contributed reporting from New York.



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