

# THE FLOOD

➔ **SPRING OF 2011** was a difficult time for many states as water levels rose on the mighty Mississippi River: the river borders ten states, and most if not all experienced some degree of flooding this spring.



Illinois DNR officers Cork and Hyatt work with White County Life Flight and EMS to save a heart patient.

# DOG 2011



Airboat operations officers Hyatt and Bowman performing search and rescue.



**ILLINOIS WAS ESPECIALLY HARD HIT** during the months of April and May as the waters rose to record levels. Many of the state's levee systems were breached or threatened, putting thousands of lives and millions of dollars at risk. Illinois even reached the point of blowing up a section of the levee to reduce pressure on the levee system, a drastic move challenged by neighboring states and presented in the U.S. courts. North Dakota was also hit very hard just before the summer conference of the North American Wildlife Enforcement Officers Association. I surveyed the area near Minot, North Dakota in mid-July, and from the amount of damage, it was

evident that nature had taken a toll on the water systems.

During the flooding, Illinois deployed several officers, boats, and specialty equipment to the flooded area to provide all levels of service and relief to Illinois residents. This flood presented a unique hazard in Illinois during early spring: the Mississippi and Ohio rivers converge in southern Illinois, and this spring they carried record amounts of precipitation to an already saturated area. Levee structures were at or beyond capacity,

and the potential for loss of life was rapidly increasing.

Departments often send several officers to natural disasters. Illinois dispatched officers from around the state, and a variety of ranks were involved in the relief effort. During this flood, Illinois established an Incident

Command System (ICS) to facilitate the coordination, control, and command of efforts to save lives, property, and resources. In general, this system helps multiple agencies communicate and collaborate to achieve a common goal. The local district commander and



**Officer Drone checking flood levels at the levee in Cairo, IL.**

lieutenant were at the Unified Area Command (UAC) center, which funneled most of the communications related to the relief effort. Several decision-making agencies cooperated to address a multitude of needs during this disaster, including the National Guard, state police, transportation divisions, Red Cross, health departments, natural resources, and others. The system was organized into five major divisions: command, planning, operations, logistics, and finance/administration. The Illinois Department of Natural Resources played a critical role in many aspects of the ICS: Illinois conservation police officers were dispatched around the flooded area to perform search and rescue, evacuations, and infrastructure checks; provide security; and carry out additional law enforcement responsibilities.

This disaster affected thousands of people, cost millions of dollars, and presented displaced families with a long path to recovery. Officers in the field worked 24 hours a day manning watercraft, ATVs, and other rescue



**Officer Mansell getting ready for a relay patrol.**

equipment, responding to calls for service and actively patrolling areas of concern.

Getting families out of their homes and to safety was an important part of the process, but not the only responsibility of officers during the flood. During the three-week event, officers responded to a variety of calls. As flooding began, officers roamed the affected areas and advised residents of the rapidly rising waters. Families were urged to evacuate based on recommendations from local governments, but many people could not leave in such a short period of time and required medical assistance. Additionally, the floodwaters brought on

stress from physical exertion, poor sanitation conditions, and mental and psychological fatigue, which all contributed to medical calls. At one point, officers responded to the ultimate request for service, as psychological pressure had gotten the better of a man who took his own life. These officers faced a grieving family present at the time of death, as well as a crime scene, domestic displacement, and a pressing need for family and human services.

Officers ferried several hundred stranded residents out by boat as the waters rose at unprecedented rates. Some families waited longer than others to leave, which created additional hazards for responding officers. Officers evacuated people first, until all families were accounted for, and then continued on to search for and rescue family dogs, cats, horses, and other companion animals during the three weeks of turmoil. Rescuers could not relocate some animals, but monitored them and provided them with food and water. Officers helped a local pig farmer transport feed to the island field where his animals



Officer Drone checking sink holes formed as water seeps up from underground.

were running low on resources. Additionally, officers helped local governments remove important documents from court buildings, postal offices, and records divisions. Hundreds of years worth of historical documents had to be removed from clerks' offices and community centers.

**D**URING THE INITIAL STAGE of evacuation, officers had several other obligations. As people refused to leave, officers placed rescue equipment and life jackets in central locations for those citizens who stayed behind. Officers delivered hundreds of life jackets, water, sand bags, and other life necessities. In areas where a mandatory evacuation was ordered, houses were marked with highly visible tape indicating the occupancy status of the home. If its residents had left, a house was marked, but if they had stayed behind, it was not: this allowed officers to quickly determine occupancy when surveying areas during rescue situations. People wishing to stay behind were asked to sign a document stating their intentions. Many town trustees

**Alexander County thanks employees of the Illinois Department of Natural Resources for their efforts.**

and village officials opted to stay as long as residents remained.

The next two weeks proved challenging for officers as calls for a wide range of service rolled in. In addition to these calls, officers remained responsible for regular patrols, equipment maintenance, and administrative tasks. Local officers were teamed with officers from out of town to facilitate efficiency. If enforcement action was paramount, local officers completed the legal process so out-of-town officers didn't have to travel back for court proceedings.

The rising waters triggered the preparation stage of the deployment. Officers and administrators were organized and

deployed to affected areas, and locations with multiple affected areas were given an incident command center, which reported back to the unified area command. These mobile incident command centers incorporated temporary office communications centers: laptop computers, printers, phones, and Internet were integrated onsite. Safety equipment, temporary officer accommodations, and basic resources were assembled to meet the fundamental needs of officers working at these remote centers, and food was often shipped in to feed the officers, volunteers, and emergency services personnel. Remote compatibility was a key feature in this disaster. Displaced equipment, supplies, and comfort items had to be brought in for officers and rescue personnel. Improvised services included makeshift sleeping accommodations, food centers, and medical facilities.

One of the key tools used in the rescue operations was an airboat operated by officers Hyatt, Compton, and Cork – the flat-bottomed airboat facilitates shallow-water rescues impossible for traditional

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Officers Bowman and Williamson relay feed to a hog farming operation.

boats. Traditional propeller-driven vessels also had difficulty with the damaged structures and debris spread throughout the flooded areas.

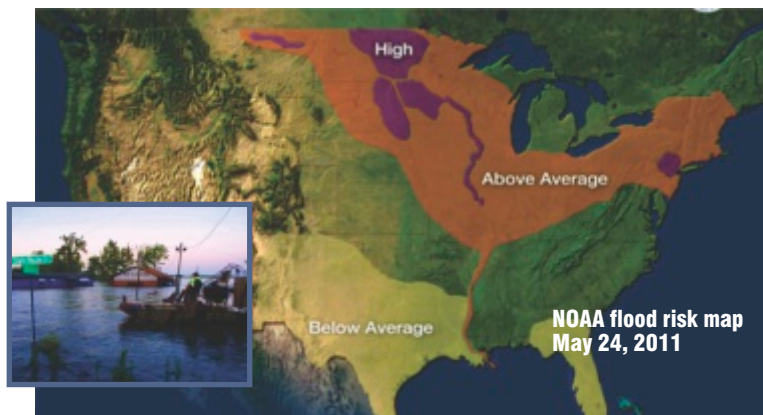
The airboat was particularly important in this flat region of Illinois, as many of the flooded areas were inundated with anywhere from a few inches to a few feet of water.

The airboat performed several medical assists: when officers on board the vessel secured the medical patient, they transferred the person to high ground, where a life-flight helicopter and local EMS staff were

waiting. The expeditious transportation provided by the airboat was a staple request during the flood of 2011.

Mother Nature does not always tell us when the 500-year flood or other natural disaster will strike. Through training, education, and cooperation, the Illinois Department of Natural Resources Conservation Police and other emergency agencies lessened the effects of the flood of 2011.

*By Steve Beltran, Illinois Conservation Police Officer, serving since 2000.*



## National weather service posting May 24, 2011

The National Weather Service says expect above normal flooding conditions along Illinois' western border this spring.

Compiled by staff  
Published: Mar 24, 2011

The Mississippi River is likely to see major flooding beginning in late March from its headwaters near St. Paul, Minnesota, downstream to St. Louis. St. Paul, MN has about a 95 percent chance of exceeding major flood stage of 17 feet, where secondary flood walls are deployed to protect the St. Paul Airport. Further downstream, there is a 75% chance (3 out of 4 chance) for

major flooding on the Upper Mississippi River from Winona, MN, to Keokuk, IA. Most points from south of Keokuk to Winfield, MO (about 60 river miles upstream of St. Louis) have greater than a 50% chance of major flooding. Warm temperatures in the forecast this week could cause much of the snowpack to melt across southern Minnesota.

Minor flooding could begin this week on the Mississippi River and its tributaries over southeastern Minnesota and southwestern Wisconsin, leading to moderate to major flooding by early April.

