News
EarthBeat



Uprooted trees after deadly flooding in Kerrville on July 5, 2025. (The Texas Tribune/Reuters/Sergio Flores)

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Kerrville, Texas — July 7, 2025

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The forecast began to look ominous in the Texas Hill Country on Thursday afternoon.

A flood watch was issued by the National Weather Service at 1:18 p.m. that predicted up to 7 inches of isolated rainfall early Friday morning in South Central Texas, including Kerr County.

By the time the sun rose on the Fourth of July, less than 24 hours later, as much as 12 inches of rain had fallen in parts of the region while its residents were asleep, according to NWS radar estimates. The Guadalupe River gauge at the unincorporated community of Hunt, where the river forks, recorded a 22-foot rise in just two hours, said Bob Fogarty, meteorologist with the NWS Austin/San Antonio office. The gauge recorded a level of 29 ½ feet before becoming completely submerged and failing, Fogarty added.

At least 68 people were killed by the flooding in Kerr County, local officials said Sunday afternoon. More remained missing, including 10 young girls and a counselor from a Christian summer camp. At least 11 additional deaths were confirmed in surrounding counties, pushing the storm's overall toll to at least 79. The scale of the disaster — and the fact that major flooding is common in this part of Texas — has raised questions over whether more could have been done to warn people in the path of the flood waters.

Local and state officials were quick to point to weather forecasts that did not accurately predict the intensity of the rainfall. Meanwhile, some forecasters suggested that local officials and camp leadership should have activated more given the threats that were apparent.

"The heartbreaking catastrophe that occurred in Central Texas is a tragedy of the worst sort because it appears evacuations and other proactive measures could have been undertaken to reduce the risk of fatalities had the organizers of impacted camps and local officials heeded the warnings of the government and private weather sources, including AccuWeather," AccuWeather Chief Meteorologist Jonathan Porter wrote in a statement Saturday morning.

Nim Kidd, chief of the Texas Division of Emergency Management, on Friday pointed to NWS forecasts from earlier in the week that projected up to 6 inches of rain.

"It did not predict the amount of rain that we saw," Kidd said.

Kerr County Judge Rob Kelly echoed Kidd. When he was asked why camps along the Guadalupe were not evacuated, Kelly told reporters the county had "no reason to believe that this was going to be anything like what's happened here."

However, warnings were issued about the potential for flash flooding hours before the waters reached their peak.

Rain began to fall around midnight, and the first flash flood warning was issued by the NWS at 1:14 a.m. Friday, Fogarty said. That warning should have triggered a response by local emergency management and local media to spread the word to those in harm's way, as well as the Emergency Alert System that broadcasts warnings to televisions and radios, Fogarty said.

All NWS flash flood warnings, including the one issued after midnight on Friday, trigger Wireless Emergency Alerts, the emergency push notification sent through cellphone towers to all wireless phones in the emergency area, Fogarty said. That warning was updated nine times throughout Friday, each of which triggered separate alerts through the Emergency Alert System and the Wireless Emergency Alerts, Fogarty said.

The most serious warning came at 4:03 a.m. when the NWS issued a flash flood emergency, warning of an "extremely dangerous and life-threatening situation" and urging immediate evacuations to higher ground. Flash flood emergencies are issued using a mixture of rainfall data and on-the-ground reports: "Someone has told us we need to get people out of here immediately or people are going to die," Fogarty said.

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The flooding came amid concerns about staffing levels at the NWS, after the Trump administration fired hundreds of meteorologists this year as part of Elon Musk's DOGE cuts. The NWS Austin/San Antonio office's warning coordination meteorologist announced in April that he was retiring early due to the funding cuts, leading to speculation that vacancies could have impacted forecasters' response.

The NWS forecasting offices were operating normally at the time of the disaster, said Greg Waller, service coordination hydrologist with the NWS West Gulf River Forecast

Center in Fort Worth.

"We had adequate staffing. We had adequate technology," Waller said. "This was us doing our job to the best of our abilities."

Staffing data provided by the NWS's labor union showed the San Angelo forecasting office currently has four vacancies out of 23 positions and San Antonio has six vacancies out of 26.

Legislative Director Tom Fahy said that was adequate to issue timely forecasts and warnings before and during the emergency.

At least one independent meteorologist working in Texas echoed that statement, writing on his website that "we have seen absolutely nothing to suggest that current staffing or budget issues within NOAA and the NWS played any role at all in this event."

The timing of the flood may have been a complicating factor. The alerts came out during the start of the Fourth of July weekend, when RV parks, cabins and homes are filled with tourists who might not be as familiar with the flood risks or the habits of the water.

Between 2 and 7 a.m., the Guadalupe River in Kerrville rose from 1 to more than 34 feet in height, according to a flood gauge in the area. The flooding reached its peak at around 6:45 a.m. in Kerrville, hours after warnings were first issued, according to the gauge.

When the NWS issued its flash flood emergency, the river height was still under two feet, although it began to rise quickly shortly after the alert was issued. Major flooding on the river is considered anything above 20 feet, a level the gauge recorded a little after 6 a.m. on Friday.

Porter noted the danger of the nighttime flooding, when many people are asleep and slower to respond to warnings.

Kerrville City Manager Dalton Rice told reporters Friday that the suddenness and intensity of the flood caught city officials flat-footed.

"This happened very quickly over a very short amount of time that could not be predicted," Rice said. "This is not like a tornado where you can have a siren. This is

not a hurricane where you're planning weeks in advance. It hit hard and things like this happen in a very strategic, very isolated area and when those two things converge you have what happened today."

Asked Saturday afternoon what kind of procedures the county had to warn the summer camps along the river about flooding emergencies, Rice said that each camp is private. This situation happened very fast, he said, so "there wasn't a lot of time in this case as far as warnings."

Right now, he said, the focus is on search and rescue operations; they want to address questions about warnings later.

Waller, meanwhile, noted that flooding has long been a problem in the area.

"In my career, this is our worst case scenario that we brief all of our new forecasters on," Waller said.

The terrain in the area makes it so precipitation forecasts off by just 20 miles could affect entirely different river basins, he said.

Given the river's history, Porter said reports of survivors being awoken by rapidly rising water and forced to evacuate in the middle of the emergency instead of much earlier after the warnings were first issued were "extremely concerning."

The region has experienced catastrophic flooding before, including the 2015 Wimberley flood that left 13 people dead, as well as major floods in 2007 and 2002. A July 1987 flood of the Guadalupe River devastated Kerrville and other communities along the waterway.

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Jessica Shuran Yu and Alejandra Martinez contributed reporting.