

# Budget cuts put vital U.S. flood warning system at risk

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A rescue official stands with a motorist stuck in water during heavy rains and flooding in Round Lake Heights, Illinois, Thursday, April 18, 2013, at Pontiac Court and Tomahawk Trail. Joe Shuman/Chicago Tribune/MCT

**WASHINGTON** – At least four people have been killed in Midwest floods caused by record rains this spring. But it could have been worse.

Forecasters said that even more people could have died if it were not for river gauges. A gauge is a kind of measuring stick that sits in the water. The United States has a whole system of gauges to quickly track the rise of rivers. But that 8,000-gauge network may shrink. The reason is the budget fight in Washington, D.C.

As many as 375 gauges could be shut down. That is what the U.S. agency that runs the program says, unless Congress passes a budget to undo forced spending cuts.

The network is already shrinking due to cuts by state and local governments. Those agencies work with federal agencies to pay for the network.

## Climate Change Makes It Worse

The stations each cost about \$15,500 to keep running each year. But [climate change \(https://www.newsela.com/?tag=global+warming\)](https://www.newsela.com/?tag=global+warming) increases the chance of extreme droughts and floods. So experts say shutting the stations could have really bad results.

The government says 145 stations have recently been shut. Florida was hit worst. Meanwhile, funding has not been renewed for 508 other stations. Many of those are in the Northeast.

The cutbacks threaten to delay flood warnings. They will also hurt the work of people who use the data for other things. Studying water quality and building dams or bridges will be harder to do.

All the gauges are used to protect life and property, said Michael Norris, the network's coordinator. "They're used for so many things, and the public doesn't even know what they are."

One example of how the gauges are important came on Tuesday at the U.S. Supreme Court. Texas and Oklahoma are fighting there about water in the Red River Basin. Attorney Lisa Blatt, representing Oklahoma, said the lack of gauges in the basin makes it nearly impossible to tell how much water each state is taking. Without that information, nobody can tell if they are following a legal agreement.

## Life And Death

When it comes to flooding, emergency officials say the data can mean the difference between life and death. The deaths can be especially great in the case of flash floods, which are caused by sudden torrential rains. That type of flood killed at least 26 people in May 2010 in Tennessee and Kentucky.

Warnings can reduce the human and economic toll of floods, studies by the National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Service (NOAA) have found. Just a one-hour warning can reduce damage by 10 percent. Building levees and other long-term projects can save an estimated \$163 million each year.

"Data was absolutely critical," earlier this month, said Mark Walton, manager of the National Weather Service Forecast Office in Grand Rapids. That is when the Grand River's overflow forced 1,700 people to leave their homes in Kent County, Michigan. Without the data, "we would have basically been flying blind," he said.

Though there was serious property damage, no injuries have been reported. Streamflow gauges were a big reason why, he said.

Last year, Michigan was at risk of losing several gauges. That included those near cities with a lot of people. But the USGS was able to get enough local support to keep them running -- for now, at least.

New York recently faced the threat of dozens of shutdowns, including many gauges in the Susquehanna River Basin. That is one of the country's most flood-prone areas. But after a strong push from area senators, money was set aside to keep some of the gauges running.

Susan Obleski, of the Susquehanna River Basin Commission, said she was glad the money came through. But the cash will only last four months. That is not enough for something so important, she said.

Norris, the network's coordinator, agreed. He said money is needed to keep the network of gauges running everywhere. A regional patchwork of last-minute efforts will not do. This is because much of the nation's water system is linked. "The flows in New York are affected by what happens in Pennsylvania and Vermont," he said.

President Barack Obama has proposed increasing the program's budget about 25 percent. Though the proposed budget has a slim chance -- if any -- to wriggle through Congress, Norris takes it as a sign that politicians, even those trying to pinch pennies, see the value of the gauges.

"It's a no-brainer," he said. "Like motherhood and apple pie."

**Quiz**

- 1 Which sentence uses the word "record" as it is used in the first paragraph of the article?
- (A) My mother used to listen to her favorite music on records and a record player.
  - (B) Temperatures hit record highs in the state of Florida for the month of February.
  - (C) Astronomers use many tools to record information about asteroids and comets.
  - (D) Newspaper editors are unwilling to go on the record about articles being copied.

- 2 Read the sentences from the article and answer the question.

*The cutbacks threaten to delay flood warnings. They will also hurt the work of people who use the data for other things.*

Which sentence from the article contains the meaning of the word "data?"

- (A) One example of how the gauges are important came on Tuesday at the U.S. Supreme Court.
  - (B) Texas and Oklahoma are fighting there about water in the Red River Basin.
  - (C) Attorney Lisa Blatt, representing Oklahoma, said the lack of gauges in the basin makes it nearly impossible to tell how much water each state is taking.
  - (D) Without that information, nobody can tell if they are following a legal agreement.
- 3 Which of these sentences uses the word "toll" as it is used in the section of the article "Life and Death?"
- (A) Jenny called a toll-free number to try to get health insurance for her mother.
  - (B) The doctor refused to investigate the mysterious disease despite the high death toll.
  - (C) People crossing the toll bridge had to pay a large fee before entering into the city.
  - (D) The toll of the cathedral bell announced the start of the new year.

- 4 What is the meaning of the word "overflow" as it is used in the article?
- (A) lack
  - (B) run-off
  - (C) spare
  - (D) short-fall