

National

Minnesota family that lost home to flood vows to reopen store

By Hannah Fingerhut
and Dave Collins
Associated Press



Casey Ek/The Free Press via AP

The innards of a house near the Rapidan Dam in Rapidan, Minn., are visible as waters from the Blue Earth River rush by, on Monday.

DES MOINES, Iowa — A Minnesota family that watched helplessly as their house tumbled into a flooded river that eroded the bank where the home was perched say as soon as it's safe, they will reopen their nearby store, known for pies and burgers.

The Rapidan Dam Store remained standing Thursday, but the house where its owners grew up toppled into the swelled Blue Earth River near Mankato two days earlier. Flooding in the area was improving, and the National Weather Service was now predicting that flooding downstream is unlikely to be devastating.

"We don't know what will happen," a post on the store's Facebook page said Wednesday night, adding that it's been a hard experience. "The Dam Store has not sold its last burger or sold its last slice of pie."

Hundreds of flood-damaged or destroyed homes elsewhere in the upper Midwest are among the first property casualties of extreme weather gripping the region as floodwaters move south.

Meanwhile, severe weather ravaged other parts of the country, including the Northeast where two people have died.

A man in Connecticut and a man in New Jersey both died from fallen trees. Strong storms raked parts of the Northeast late Wednesday into early Thursday, initially leaving some 250,000 in the region without power.

A swath through Nebraska, Iowa, South Dakota and Minnesota has been under siege from flooding because of torrential rains since last week, while also suffering through a stifling heat wave. Up to 18 inches of rain have fallen in some areas, pushing some rivers to record levels. Hundreds of people have been rescued and at least two people have died after driving in flooded areas.

In Iowa, more towns braced for floodwaters, but at least some caught a break. The west fork of the

Des Moines River reached its crest early Thursday at about 17 feet, where it will linger for a bit before the waters begin to recede. Humboldt County emergency manager Kyle Bissell breathed a sigh of relief at that news, noting that while the swollen river had taken its toll on several dozen homes, the threat of more damage had dwindled.

"They had a lot of time to prepare, and they did a great job," he said of Humboldt homes and businesses.

Mr. Bissell said about 50 to 75 homes have reported minor damage, with some water seeping into their basements, lower than the 200 homes anticipated. Only a few unoccupied summer cabins appear to have sustained major damage.

A levee on Little Sioux River in Monona County, Iowa, was damaged by floods, but county emergency coordinator Patrick Prorok said the flooding was being contained by another segment of the levee system.

The levee was the only one under federal operation reported to have failed in the region, according to the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Omaha district.

In the coming days, Nebraska and northwestern Missouri are expected to start to see the downstream effects of the flooding. Many streams and rivers may not crest until later this week.

The Missouri River was expected to crest at Omaha on Thursday, said Kevin Low, a weather service hydrologist.

Jessica Keech and her 11-year-old son watched part of the house near the dam fall into the river Tuesday night. They had often visited the area to see the dam and enjoy the pie from the Dam Store.

"It just kind of sucked it into the water. Just literally disappeared," said Ms. Keech, of nearby New Ulm.

Blue Earth County officials said the river had cut more widely and deeply into the bank, and they were concerned about the integrity of a nearby bridge over the river.

After the flooding subsides, the county must decide whether to make repairs to the dam or possibly remove it — with both options costing millions of dollars.

Numerous roads were closed because of the flooding, including Interstates 29 and 680 in Iowa near the Nebraska line.

Oklahoma state superintendent orders schools to teach the Bible in grades 5 through 12

By Sean Murphy
Associated Press

OKLAHOMA CITY — Oklahoma's top education official ordered public schools Thursday to incorporate the Bible into lessons for grades 5 through 12, the latest effort by conservatives to incorporate religion into classrooms.

The directive drew immediate condemnation from civil rights groups and supporters of the separation of church and state, with some calling it an abuse of power and a violation of the U.S. Constitution.

The order sent to districts across the state by Republican State Superintendent Ryan Walters says adherence to the mandate is compulsory and "immediate and strict compliance is expected."

"The Bible is an indispensable historical and cultural touchstone," Mr. Walters said in a statement. "Without basic knowledge of it, Oklahoma students are unable to properly contextualize the foundation of our nation which is why Oklahoma educational standards provide for its instruction."

Oklahoma law already explicitly allows Bibles in the classroom and lets teachers use them in instruction, said Phil Bacharach, a spokesman for state Attorney General Gentner Drummond.

But it's not clear if Mr. Walters has the authority to mandate that schools teach it. State law says individual school districts have the exclusive authority to decide on instruction, curriculum, reading lists, instructional materials and textbooks.

The head of the Oklahoma chapter of the Council on American-Islamic Relations criticized the directive as a clear violation of the Constitution's Establishment Clause, which prohibits the government from "establishing" a religion.

"We adamantly oppose any requirements that religion be forcefully taught or required as a part of lesson plans in public schools, in Oklahoma, or anywhere else in the country," Adam Soltani said in a statement.

"Public schools are not Sunday schools," said Rachel Laser, president and CEO of Americans United for Separation of Church and State, in a statement. "This is textbook Christian Nationalism: Mr. Walters is abusing the power of his public office to impose his religious beliefs on everyone else's children. Not on our watch."

The directive is the latest salvo in an effort by conservative-led states to target public schools: Louisiana has required them to post the Ten Commandments in classrooms, while others are under pressure to teach the Bible and ban books and lessons about race, sexual orientation and gender identity. Earlier this week the Oklahoma Supreme Court blocked an attempt by the state to have the first publicly funded religious charter school in the country.

A former public school teacher who was elected to his post in 2022, Mr. Walters ran on a platform of fighting "woke ideology," banning books from school libraries and getting rid of "radical leftists" who he claims are indoctrinating children in classrooms.

He has clashed with leaders in both parties for his focus on culture-war issues including transgender rights and banning books, and in January he faced criticism for appointing a right-wing social media influencer from New York to a state library committee.

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