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In Midwest Floods, a Broad Threat to Crops

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Stephen Mally for The New York Times

Officials in Columbus Junction, Iowa, surveyed flooding from a bridge Sunday near the confluence of the Iowa and Cedar Rivers.

By [SUSAN SAULNY](#)
Published: June 16, 2008

NEWHALL, [Iowa](#) — Here, in some of the best soil in the world, the stunted stalks of Dave Timmerman’s newly planted corn are wilting in what sometimes look more like rice paddies than the plains, the sunshine glinting off of pools of collected water. Although time is running out, he has yet to plant all of his soybean crop because the waterlogged soil cannot support his footsteps, much less heavy machinery.

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Interview With Dave Timmerman, an Iowa

Mr. Timmerman’s small farm has been flooded four times in the past month by the Wildcat Creek, a tributary of the Cedar River which overflowed its banks at a record 31 feet last week, causing catastrophic damage

Farmer (mp3)



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Stephen Mally for The New York Times

Corn rose just above the water standing in a field near Newhall, Iowa, at a time when the stalks should be several feet high.

in nearby Cedar Rapids and other eastern Iowa towns and farmsteads.

“In the lean years, we had beautiful crops but they weren’t worth much,” Mr. Timmerman said, surveying his farm, which his family has tended since his great-great-grandfather. “Now, with commodity prices sky high, mother nature is throwing us all these curve balls. I’m 42 years old and these are by far the poorest crops I’ve ever seen.”

And he added, “It’s going downhill by the day.”

As the floodwaters receded in some areas, they rose in others.

On Sunday, residents in Iowa City — where the Iowa River was nearing its projected crest and rising downstream — were struggling with the waters, which submerged part of the [University of Iowa](#)’s campus and sent workers scrambling to move books and paintings from the university’s Arts Campus.

“Certainly Iowa City has never seen anything like this before,” said Linda Kettner, a university spokeswoman. “A lot of people have been displaced. It’s a very poignant time. And at the University of Iowa, we’ve never faced a challenge like this.”

In Cedar Rapids — where the Cedar River crested at 31 feet on Friday — the water receded Sunday, but most of the downtown streets were still flooded.

But officials were worried that worse might lie ahead as the rain-gorged tributaries spill into the Mississippi River system, threatening scores of communities. The Mississippi is expected to crest by midweek or days later.

For Mr. Timmerman and the thousands of other farmers who have seen their fields turn to floodplains, the rain and flooding could not have struck at a worse time, and their plight extends far beyond the Midwest.

Last week, the price of corn rose above \$7 a bushel on the commodities market for the first time, and soybeans rose sharply, too, reacting to the harsh weather hampering crop production across the Midwest. In addition to Iowa, the farming states of Illinois, Indiana,

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Wisconsin and Minnesota have suffered an unusual level of flooding this year.

Soaring global demand in addition to the increased use of corn for ethanol, an alternative fuel, have shrunk the worldwide supply of staples that are the core of practically every continent's diet.

Meanwhile, the price of oil has jumped, raising the cost of producing crops and feeding livestock and causing an increase in grocery bills here and abroad, sparking riots and protests in at least two dozen countries.

At a moment when corn should be almost waist-high here in Iowa, the country's top-producing corn state, more than a million acres have been washed out and destroyed.

Beyond that, agriculture experts estimate that 2 million acres of soy beans have been lost to water, putting the state's total grain loss at 20 percent so far, with the threat of more rain to come.

"The American farmer, we feed the world," Mr. Timmerman said. "We're going to be short on corn and we're going to be short on soybeans."

He continued, "It's heart-wrenching."

While Mr. Timmerman feels the weight of the situation on his own bottom line — he had just saved enough to upgrade from a 6-row planter to a 16-row version and splurged on his first new tractor — he also feels the weight of the world as he ponders his output under the wide skies of Benton County, an idyllic landscape that could rival a movie set with its picture-perfect backdrops of big red barns.

Jim Fawcett, a crop specialist at the [Iowa State University](#)'s agricultural extension service, has been hosting emergency meetings with farmers around the state. With standing water comes concerns about manure storage, pollution, livestock safety, soil erosion, mold and fungus and other plant diseases.

Catrin Einhorn contributed reporting.

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