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In Midwest Floods, a Broad Threat to Crops

By [SUSAN SAULNY](#)

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.

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 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, 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.

"We know there's going to be less of a crop now than there could have been months ago," he said. "There will be some fields where there's no crop. If the flooding continues, we won't have any growing season to work with. For corn, time has run out."

And the flooding has continued. The rain hardly stops for long. As Mr. Timmerman prepared Saturday to leave his house in suburban Cedar Rapids for his fields in Benton County, a thunderstorm pounded the ground with hail. But before he reached the fields, gray skies gave way to blinding sunshine. The light produced an odd effect on the drenched fields, causing them to shimmer.

"What kills me is that it's beautiful, then it rains, it's beautiful, then it rains," said Mr. Timmerman's wife, Rachelle. "Huge rain drops. Just pouring."

The ground does not have time to dry before more rain adds to the already saturated earth. And unseasonably cool temperatures have not helped. In May, there were some 30-degree nights. Iowa's growing season is notoriously productive because it is usually long and warm.

“Tessa kept asking, ‘When is spring coming, Mommy?’ “ Mrs. Timmerman said, referring to the youngest of her four children. “She’s 4, and she was learning about the seasons, so she wondered where spring was.”

The temperatures have finally warmed, but, Mr. Timmerman said, “We’ve been about a month behind in our weather all year.”

If the corn sprouts do not mature enough before the deep heat of summer hits, there will be more problems ahead.

The bad news keeps on coming. On Wednesday, a burst of high wind, perhaps a tornado, ripped apart one of Mr. Timmerman’s storage sheds, depositing splintery wooden debris over some of his puny soybeans. The bean sprouts should be mid-shin height by now but they barely reach to the top of Mr. Timmerman’s flip-flop.

“In years like this, you hope you can pay your bills,” he said. “Our family has roots in farming, and even when times are tough, you stay with it.”

They have certainly known the tough times. There were many years when Mr. Timmerman did not make enough money to have to pay income taxes. He used nothing but second-hand farm equipment — some of it decades old — and rented his house. He worked a full-time job off the farm, and still managed to produce bumper crops of hundreds of bushels of corn an acre.

“I knew that one day we’d see good times,” he said. Those days began to come just a few years ago. Corn prices inched up, then leaped, and suddenly he had enough money to buy a five-bedroom house, new trucks and a \$90,000 combine. Their family grew with another baby, Tessa.

But he has had to leave the new 16-row planter next to the barn on what should have been planting days. He is spending two or three times as much on seed, fertilizer and diesel fuel — some \$1,500 a month on that alone. And the processing companies where he needs to send 17 truckloads of last year’s stored corn are under water in Cedar Rapids.

Mr. Timmerman has five plots of land adding up to 760 acres. He is glad that he diversified his land, but even the land that has not been flooded has soaked up too much rain and the stalks are not anything like what he knows they could be.

An optimist at heart and a pragmatist with German roots, Mr. Timmerman grew more dejected as he drove around Benton County from Van Horne to Vinton to Keystone taking a close look at his fields for the first time since the major flooding began.

“I’m a little more depressed than I was earlier because I’m seeing dark spots that I know aren’t going to produce,” he said. “This is looking worse than I thought. It really gets to you.”

But there are bright moments even at times like this. Mr. Timmerman’s only son John, 7, recently brought home his first-grade journals.

“Yesterday, I rode the combine with my dad,” the little boy wrote, Mr. Timmerman said, bursting with pride.

He has already outfitted John with miniature versions of all the major farm equipment.

“Farmers are optimistic,” Mr. Timmerman said. “We got to be, to go out and plant and rely on mother nature.”

Catrin Einhorn contributed reporting.

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