

Anatomy of the storm

In a 48-hour span, a nondescript weather system that started in the Gulf of Mexico Feb. 28 transformed into a killer storm front that disrupted lives from Mississippi to West Virginia. It pummeled the Tristate with a deluge of rain, causing the worst flood in 33 years. This chart tracks the system's meteorological might.

2. Early Saturday morning March 1, the system turns violent: Thunderstorms spawn tornadoes in a 260-mile swath of destruction. In a five-hour period, Arkansas has 14 tornadoes — more than it had all of last year. The storms kill at least 24 in Arkansas.

1. Satellites Feb. 28 spot a mass of warm tropical air swirling above the Gulf of Mexico south of Louisiana. Early that Friday morning, the system begins to churn north along the Mississippi River, barreling toward the Ohio River valley. It is not an unusual system, but what sets it apart is that it is unusually "moist," meaning it has the potential for torrential downpours.

5. The system shifts east, largely missing Cincinnati. Still, downpours wreak havoc in Ohio's Clermont, Brown, Adams, Scioto, Lawrence and Gallia counties before moving to West Virginia.

7. Continuing its east, northeast swing, the system early Sunday, March 2, begins to dissipate, thanks to a cold front. It eventually dies out in the Great Lakes region.

6. The rain eases, but 16 West Virginia counties are declared a states of emergency as the Ohio and Kanawha rivers jump their banks.

4. Pelting rains that started late Friday continue throughout Kentucky and southern Ohio Saturday. As swollen streams and creeks pour into the Ohio River, its levels rise rapidly — nearly a foot an hour between 7 a.m. Saturday and 7 a.m. Sunday. The system drenches Kentucky. The Licking River rises to 52 feet — more than 12 feet above flood stage. About 40,000 homes and businesses in metro Louisville are flooded by late Saturday night after as much as 12 inches of rain fall.

3. Nearby states are victimized Saturday. Tornadoes kill one person each in Mississippi and Tennessee, and high winds cause two deaths in Texas.

The aftermath

Tornadoes and flooding spawned from the weather pattern have killed at least 59 people since March 1. Damage estimates are expected to be in the hundreds of millions of dollars. Thousands of homes and businesses were washed away, leaving companies closed and residents homeless.

Not only did the flood take lives, uproot century-old trees, cause millions of dollars in damages and disrupt the environment, it also left many weather observers stunned. "It was a one-in-a-thousand-year event," said Ken Haydu, meteorologist-in-charge at the National Weather Service in Wilmington. "I've never seen anything like it in my career."

Damage widespread: Much of Tristate declared disaster

The violent weather system that triggered the worst flooding along the Ohio River and its tributaries in 33 years led President Clinton to declare 136 counties in six states — including 93 in Ohio, Kentucky and Indiana — federal disaster areas. The declaration means residents and businesses in the affected counties are eligible for a wide range of federal and state disaster-assistance programs. The disaster brought Vice President Al Gore to the river's edge March 5, where he said, "The entire United States of America will come together to help Cincinnati and the surrounding areas ... to recover from this flood."

High water downstream

As Tristate counties recovered from the muddy mess left by the flood, the swollen Ohio River swamped areas in western Kentucky and southern Indiana on its way to Cairo, Ill., and the Mississippi River. Weather experts predicted the water surging out of the Ohio could cause flooding all along the Mississippi from Illinois to Louisiana.

