



In a single week

A timeline of how once-in-a-century flooding unfolded across B.C.

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November 20, 2021

In a matter of days, extreme rain swamped rivers and farmland across southern B.C. and triggered mudslides that blocked every major highway connecting the Lower Mainland to the rest of the country.

Nearly 20,000 people have been forced to abandon their homes and thousands of animals have died. Dozens of volunteers have stepped up to help their communities however they can.

It has been one of the most severe natural disasters to strike British Columbia in a generation, even after a year that has brought crisis after crisis. The sheer scope of the damage has been difficult to comprehend.

This is a timeline of the first week, from storm touchdown to early clean-up, of a disaster which has effects that will reverberate across the province for months to come.



A homeowner wades through water near her farmhouse in Abbotsford, B.C., on Monday. (Ben Nelms/CBC)

Friday, Nov. 12

Shortly before 9 a.m., meteorologists warn another extreme rainstorm is on its way to B.C., created by an atmospheric river. The storm, they caution, would bring heavy rain and snow to the southern part of the province for two days straight — on top of all the rain that fell in September and October.

That much water would create the risk of localized flooding and high river levels in some areas, they say. No travel advisories or flood warnings are put in place and hundreds of people continue with their travel plans for the Remembrance Day long weekend.

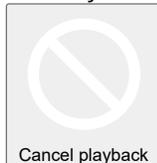


A woman walks in the rain in Chilliwack, B.C., on Nov. 12. Officials warned that morning that a severe rainstorm was on its way to B.C. (Ben Nelms/CBC)

Saturday, Nov. 13

Torrential rain begins falling across much of the province by 11 a.m. as the storm touches down. It would break dozens of all-time rainfall records, dumping nearly a month's worth of rain on some communities over 48 hours.

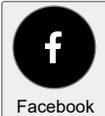
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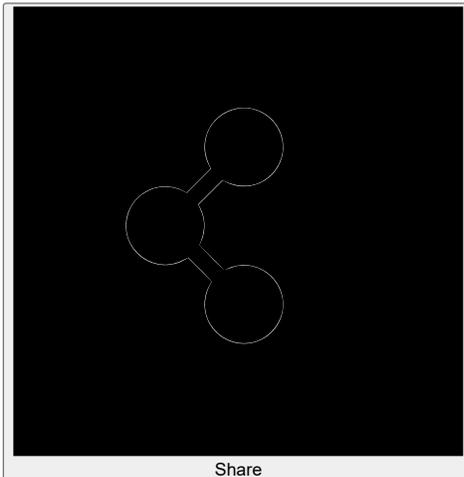
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Front Burner
How a catastrophic climate event unfolded in B.C.



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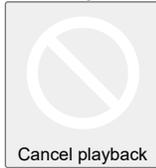
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In an episode of Front Burner, experts and journalists discuss how the storm, known as an atmospheric river, unfolded — and how other recent extreme climate events might have made it worse.

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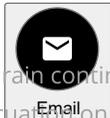
Environment Canada meteorologist Bobby Sekhon explains the extreme weather B.C. has experienced this year and how people can be prepared for an emergency.



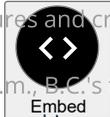
Sunday, Nov. 14



As the non-stop rain continues at a furious pace, it becomes clear just after noon that the situation on the roads is quickly turning into chaos. Reports of mudslides, closures and crashes pour in at an alarming rate.



Shortly after 1 p.m., B.C.'s transportation and emergency social media accounts begin cranking up their warnings for the first time all weekend.

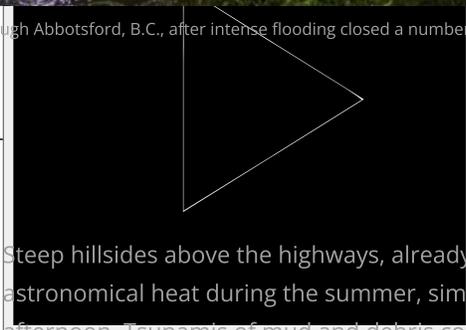


DriveBC, travellers' primary source for highway conditions in the province, begins asking drivers to "avoid any unnecessary travel" — but thousands of long weekend travellers were already on the road.





Emergency crews direct traffic through Abbotsford, B.C., after intense flooding closed a number of major highways in southern B.C. on Sunday. (Shane MacKichan)

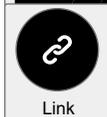


Step hillsides above the highways, already weakened by the fall's rain and astronomical heat during the summer, simply give way over the course of the afternoon. Tsunamis of mud and debris come crashing into the road, pushing more than a dozen cars off the hill.

Destructive rainfall: the latest in year of weather extremes for B.C.

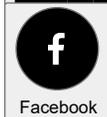
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Traveller Paul Deol speaks about spending Sunday night in his vehicle with his family after being stuck between landslides near Agassiz, B.C., and how people came together as a community.

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Very major highway across southern B.C. is closed.

Close
Hundreds of travellers spend their first night trapped under the thundering downpour in their cars or in strangers' communities.



Abandoned vehicles are seen where a mudslide happened on Highway 7, west of Agassiz, B.C. (The Canadian Press)

Watch

What it was like to spend the night stranded on a B.C. highway

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More than 1,100 travellers were stranded in Hope, B.C., after major highways were ruined or blocked by mudslides on Sunday. Many would spend days in the area, largely staying in their cars. (Submitted by Mitchell Cross)

In the Fraser Valley, east of Vancouver, the rain overwhelms small rivers and creeks that wouldn't usually be considered flood risks. The ground, already soaked to its limit, can't take any more water.

By 9 p.m., the city of Abbotsford is under a local state of emergency as water reaches homes.



Fire crews responding to a mudslide on Highway 7 near Agassiz, B.C., on Sunday gather at a command post set up at a nearby gas station. (Shane MacKichan)

Monday, Nov. 15

Residents begin to see the catastrophic damage for the first time as daylight breaks. Entire regions of the Fraser Valley, known for its rich farmland and dense with livestock farms and berry fields, are swamped by toxic floodwater.



A road in front of a home is submerged in water in Abbotsford, B.C., on Monday. (Ben Nelms/CBC)



Two people walk down a flooded street in Abbotsford, B.C., on Monday. (Ben Nelms/CBC)



Dozens of farmhouses in Abbotsford were overwhelmed by water by Monday morning. (Ben Nelms/CBC)



Farmers in Abbotsford are seen carrying livestock, including goats, through the brown floodwaters to higher ground on Monday. (Reuters)



Another farmer in Abbotsford wrestles with a goat to get the animal to drier ground on Monday. (Reuters)

To the east, the Coldwater, Tulameen and Similkameen rivers overflow their banks. By 10:30 a.m., thousands in communities like Merritt and Princeton are ordered to evacuate their homes as water and sewage infrastructure fails.



A resident standing knee-deep in water watches flooding in Merritt, B.C., on Monday. (Maggie MacPherson/CBC)



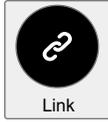
The city of Merritt, population roughly 7,000, was completely overcome with water on Monday. (Maggie MacPherson/CBC)

Emergency responders are pictured driving a truck through flooded streets in residential part of Merritt, B.C., on Monday. (Maggie MacPherson/CBC)

Evacuees are seen at a reception centre in the Merritt area on Monday. The entire city was ordered to evacuate after the local wastewater treatment failed as a result of the flood. (Maggie MacPherson/CBC)

The Nooaitch Indian Band, near Merritt, is left landlocked as bridges collapse.

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Construction crews have been working around the clock to build a bridge for the Nooaitch First Nation near Merritt, B.C., which has been completely cut off by flooding.



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Fallen trees and debris are piled up after a landslide on Highway 99, south of Lillooet, B.C., on Monday. (B.C. Ministry of Transportation)

Highway 99, south of Lillooet, B.C., was shut down Monday. One woman was killed in the landslide, with several more missing. (B.C. Ministry of Transportation)



By afternoon, the Royal Canadian Air Force has rescued more than 300 people by helicopter from the zone between two landslides on Highway 7, near Agassiz, B.C.

Watch

B.C. First Nation stranded by flooding, crews

Crew members from Royal Canadian Air Force 442 Squadron help some of the people stranded by mudslides out of a CH-149 Cormorant helicopter after their evacuation, in Agassiz, B.C., on Monday. (The Canadian Press)

work to build bridge

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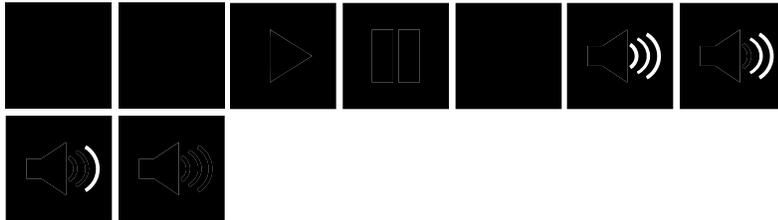
Tuesday, Nov. 16

At daybreak, rescue efforts begin for people who are stranded in areas of Abbotsford surrounded by water.

Highway 1 has disappeared in the eastern portion of the city, after water from the Nooksack River from neighbouring Washington state gushed into the Sumas Prairie.



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Homes and farmland in Sumas Prairie were almost completely underwater by Tuesday. (Ben Nelms/CBC)



A family is transported on a boat after being rescued from an area that was cut off due to flooding in Abbotsford on Tuesday. (Ben Nelms/CBC)



Two people are seen after being rescued from a flooded area of Abbotsford on Tuesday. (Ben Nelms/CBC)



In all, hundreds of people had to be rescued from flooded parts of Abbotsford over the course of the week. (Ben Nelms/CBC)



An RCMP helicopter surveys homes and farms in the community of Sumas Prairie in Abbotsford on Tuesday. (Ben Nelms/CBC)

To the east, in Princeton, some residents are able to return home to look at the damage. Many find their homes caked in a layer of mud and debris.



Rhonda Warner, left, and her husband are pictured in their mud-covered home in Princeton, B.C., on Tuesday. (Maggie MacPherson/CBC)



Family photos saved from the Warner home in Princeton are seen on Tuesday. (Maggie MacPherson/CBC)



Inside a house covered in mud and debris after the flood in Princeton. (Maggie MacPherson/CBC)



Dillon Marsel is pictured Tuesday inside his house in Princeton, which was covered in dirty floodwater. (Maggie MacPherson/CBC)

At 7:30 p.m., the nightmare in Abbotsford becomes even more desperate — the city fears the Barrowtown Pump Station, meant to prevent the prairie from reforming into the lake it used to be, could fail within hours. If that happens, they say, more water from the Fraser River would rush into the already-flooded area at a “catastrophic” rate.

More than 150 volunteers work through the night to save the pump station, forming a human chain to pass tens of thousands of heavy sandbags down to a makeshift dam.

Nearly 200 people are rescued from the prairie by morning.

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A small army of residents... to sandbag around the Barrowtown Pump Station to try to hold back floodwaters that threaten to overwhelm the facility. In the end, it was saved.

Close



Wednesday Nov. 17

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back to safety through water more than a metre deep.

The province confirms thousands of animals, including livestock in the Fraser

Valley, have already died.

Close



Many animals still alive are in desperate need of veterinarians' help, but officials say many will likely have to be euthanized.





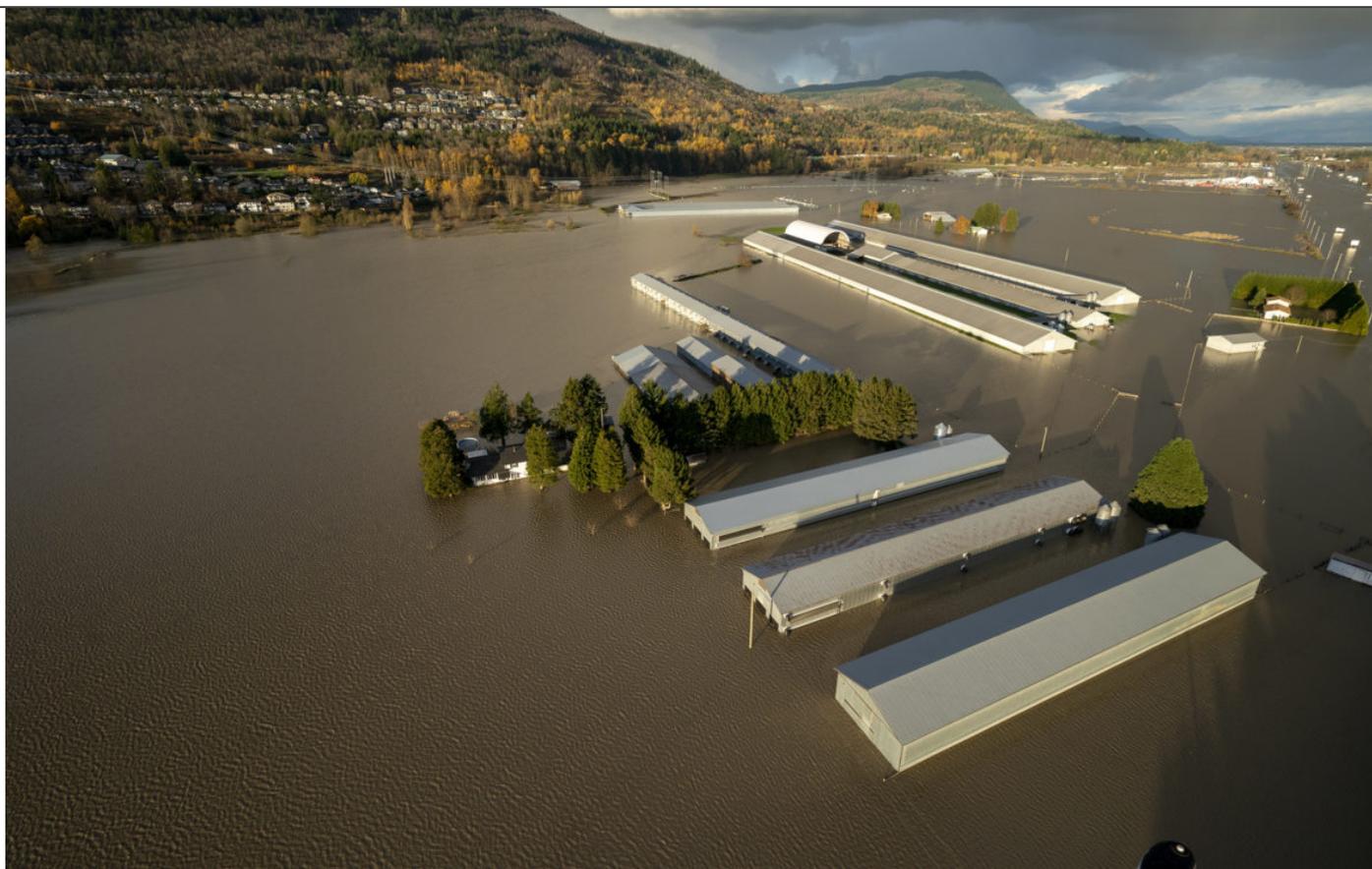
Cows that were stranded in a flooded barn are rescued by a group of people on Wednesday in Abbotsford. (Reuters)

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Cows that were stranded in a flooded barn are towed to safety in Abbotsford. Thousands of animals died in the flooding. (Reuters)



Rising floodwaters surround dozens of barns in Abbotsford, home to more than half of all the dairy farms in B.C. (The Canadian Press)

Photos emerge through the day showing entire bridges on essential highways completely collapsed. Supermarket shelves were bare in some areas as highway closures created supply-chain bottlenecks and fuelled panic buying.

The province says the storm was the worst weather to hit the area "in a century."



A collapsed bridge on the Coquihalla Highway, which links the Lower Mainland to the B.C. Interior, is seen after the flooding and washouts. (The Canadian Press)



Ruined cars and damage caused by heavy rains and mudslides earlier in the week is seen along the Coquihalla Highway, near Hope. (The Canadian Press)



Multiple areas of the Coquihalla Highway were washed out in the storm. Officials say it will take months to repair. (The Canadian Press)

Thursday, Nov. 18

After two days of dry weather, floodwaters drop in some areas of the province and an immense cleanup effort begins.

At an afternoon news conference, officials say it's still too early to assign a dollar figure to all of the damage, but the mayor of Abbotsford warns federal and provincial officials the estimated cost to rebuild his city alone could be as much as \$1 billion.



Debris is pictured in Sumas Prairie after floodwaters receded slightly in Abbotsford on Thursday. (Ben Nelms/CBC)



Garbage and debris are seen covering the train tracks in Sumas Prairie on Thursday. (Ben Nelms/CBC)

More than 17,700 people are still out of their homes — enough people to fill nearly all of Rogers Arena in Vancouver.



Joey Green, left, and his daughter Montana Green are pictured with their dog Tucker outside their RV in a Walmart parking lot near Merritt. The Greens evacuated their home on Monday. (Maggie MacPherson/CBC)

Friday, Nov. 19

By morning, hundreds of personnel with the Canadian Armed Forces arrive in B.C. to help with disaster relief. Volunteers in the Yarrow neighbourhood of Chilliwack, B.C., fill and deliver sandbags to farms inside the floodwater zone in Sumas Prairie.

Inspectors leave for cities like Merritt by 11:30 a.m. to start door-to-door assessments of homes left behind, tagging them green, yellow or red.

The province begins rationing gasoline on Vancouver Island, in southwestern B.C. and along the Sunshine Coast because the storm severed supply lines. Non-essential travel is banned on the major roads that managed to reopen — Highways 3, 7 and 99.

Officials say cleanup and repairs to that which can be saved will take months.



Canadian military personnel prepare a C-17 Globemaster for departure at Canadian Forces Base Trenton in Trenton, Ontario, on Friday. The plane was loaded with three CH 146 Griffon helicopter and personnel at CFB Valcartier to help out with the flooding in B.C. (The Canadian Press)



Volunteers in the Yarrow neighbourhood of Chilliwack, B.C., fill and deliver sandbags to farms inside the floodwater zone in Sumas Prairie. (Ben Nelms/CBC)



Volunteers in the Yarrow neighbourhood formed a human chain to deliver sandbags to waiting boats. (Ben Nelms/CBC)



A farmer is seen on a flooded farm in the Yarrow area on Friday. (Ben Nelms/CBC)



Volunteers used their personal boats to deliver the sandbags, volunteering to help the neighbouring farmers. (Ben Nelms/CBC)

Edited by Jan Zeschky | Lead image by Ben Nelms

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Find all of our coverage of B.C.'s devastating floods and landslides here



What are atmospheric rivers, and how are they affecting the B.C. floods?



B.C. has never used the national Alert Ready system. Facing disaster after disaster, that might soon change



Extraordinary kindness and community help British Columbians navigate historic floods



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