



Written by [Raven Clabough](#) on May 4, 2011

Tornadoes Worsen Economy of Alabama, Other Southern States

The state of Alabama was already struggling with high unemployment when it was pummeled by tornadoes last week. As businesses and homes have been destroyed by the twisters, many residents in the region are struggling to recover from the devastation without their jobs.

Fox News [reports](#), "Thousands were thrown out of work by the twisters last week that killed 328 people across seven states in the nation's deadliest tornado outbreak since the Depression. Hundreds of factories and other businesses were destroyed, and many others were left without electricity."



As the costs of the disaster continue to be calculated, officials report that Alabama was hit the hardest, as its residents comprised two-thirds of the casualties. The losses from the recent tornadoes are predicted to surpass the \$1 billion in damages that the state suffered after Hurricane Katrina in 2005. "It's going to be extremely high," acknowledged Seth Hammett, director of the Alabama Development Office.

For example, Alabama contractor Robert Rapley lost both his home and his livelihood in the storm, as his saws, paint sprayer, and truck were destroyed. He now struggles with the difficulties of recovering from the disaster without earning a living. "We lost everything," Rapley lamented. "I can't even go to work."

Rapley and his wife reportedly took cover from the storm in a storage room next to his garage, where they prayed the Lord's Prayer as the storm thundered past. Afterwards, Rapley discovered that the deed to his property had been blown away by the tornado, and the home in which he and his wife had lived for 20 years was reduced to rubble. They are currently living in a hotel, awaiting federal aid. "It's very expensive," he said. "We're spending our last dime right now."

Similarly, Curtis Frederick of Tuscaloosa had been unable to find substantial work that would help him to support his three children, but was able to secure a position delivering newspapers. Unfortunately, the storm wiped out his mobile home park. "There's a lot of people that need help," he noted. "We're already struggling from the economy being so bad."

A number of the Southern states hardest hit by the storms were already afflicted with economic woes before last week — particularly Alabama, Tennessee, Georgia, and Mississippi, with unemployment ranging from 9.2 percent in Alabama to 10.2 percent in Mississippi.

Tuesday's rain [hampered](#) the cleanup efforts for those who had hoped to salvage from the debris whatever belongings they could. Fox News explains: "In gray and chilly Tuscaloosa, many lost everything, including coats, sweat shirts and sweaters, leaving them shivering in unseasonable



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temperatures in the low 50s.”

Becky Curtis of Tuscaloosa told Fox News, “We’re trying to get all this stuff out of here as fast as we can to save some mementos [and] the rain definitely does not help.” Though the rain is expected to stop soon, low temperatures are predicted for the next few days.

Former Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice toured a donation center in Birmingham, Alabama, her home city, which was ravaged by the storm. “You realize that with every home that’s flattened, there are dreams and memories that have gone with that home. So this is a very human tragedy,” she observed.

A Toyota plant in Huntsville, Alabama, which employs 800 people, lost power after a twister damaged electrical lines. Toyota officials have indicated that they are unsure when electricity will be restored.

In tiny Hackleburg, Alabama — home to 1,500 people — a twister destroyed a Wrangler jeans distribution center, which employed 150 of the residents. The town was already struggling with an unemployment rate of 13 percent. “That one industry is the town,” said Seth Hammett. “Until they get back up and going again, that town will not be the same.” Fortunately, the parent company of Wrangler, VF Corp., is already in the process of setting up distribution operations in another nearby location to allow the employees to get back to work quickly, though they are continuing to receive pay and benefits.

Others who have lost jobs as a result of the storms qualify for both unemployment benefits and federal disaster aid.

Likewise, the recovery process is expected to help create jobs. Sam Addy, director of the Center for Business and Economic Research at the University of Alabama, states, “The rebuilding is huge. That brings in a lot of jobs and cash flow into the local area. For the larger economy, [however,] it’s a loss.”

Alabama’s Governor Robert Bentley had been in office for only 100 days when the storms hit, and now faces an unprecedented recovery effort, with more than half of the state’s counties declared disaster areas. Bentley, on behalf of state officials, assured his citizens, “Ladies and gentlemen, we cannot — and will not — let these people down. As leaders of this state, we will see that Alabama is rebuilt.”

Outside of Alabama, businesses are struggling to get back to work as well. In Smithville, Mississippi, for example, the storm damaged facilities owned by Townhouse Home Furnishings, where 150 people work, making it the town’s largest employer. The company plans to relocate its operations temporarily to a location in Mantachie, about a 30-minute drive from Smithville. Company officials stated, “We’re trying to keep our people working so they can get a paycheck. It could be six months or a year before we reopen in Smithville and they have to keep up with orders or we’ll lose accounts.”

Photo: Heather Sanford, a University of Alabama student, looks for her belongings in what used to be the Arlington Square Apartments in Tuscaloosa, Ala.: April 28, 2011: AP Images



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