

Speeches  
12/1/51  
Rhode Island

sent to  
Allypinewater  
289 Broadway  
Providence

Po Valley  
Flood

I am very happy to accept the invitation of the Rhode Island Committee for Italian Flood Relief in order to acquaint the people of Rhode Island through a birdseye view of the terrible disaster that was caused by the flood in the Po Valley in the northern part of Italy during the month of November. I was with a Congressional committee that arrived in Rome on November 18th, and during our stay in Rome it was my privilege to fly over the flood areas and to see with my own eyes the terrible disaster the flood caused.

We were informed by our Embassy officials in Rome that the losses are in the neighborhood of three hundred million American dollars. This does not include losses of industrial equipment, raw materials, natural gas installations, etc. An interesting comparison was made in the losses suffered by this flood and the losses suffered through the Missouri River flood in our own country only a few months ago. The flood in northern Italy was responsible for the loss of 1 1/4% of Italy's gross national product. The Missouri River Valley flood, according to geological surveys, cost the United States nine million dollars and resulted in the loss of 1/4 of 1% of United States gross national production. Although the Missouri River Valley flood was three times as great dollar-wise, the Po River Valley was relatively five times as serious. I think you will remember through all the publicity given to the Missouri River flood that that was one of the major disasters in this country, and yet the Po River Valley disaster was five times as serious.

The principal flood occurred in the northern part of the Po River Valley and covered an area approximately 60 miles long and 20 miles wide; also scattered areas in the upper Po Valley were affected. The death toll has been estimated at about 200 and there are about 200,000 homeless. A little more damage was experienced in the north than in the south. In area some 5000 acres were affected, much of which will require draining by pump because some of that area is below sea level. It is estimated that it will take from six to eight months to drain off the silt from this most productive land in Italy. Destroyed in this area were 72,000 acres that had just been sown to wheat, which is one of the most essential agricultural products in Italy. Also destroyed were 40,000 acres of hay land, and 4,000 acres of orchards. It was estimated that the flood washed away about 3,000 farm houses.

The flood also posed a serious health menace. Sewerage and water systems were destroyed in many of the smaller towns and cities in this particular area. It has been a known fact for many years that all food supplies have been short in Italy because of the greatly increased population. It will never be possible for Italy ever to produce enough food to be self-sustaining without importing substantial quantities, although there have been many improvements in the last few years in Italian agriculture both as to the methods and types of farming. The wheat yield has been greatly improved and the production of modern hybrid corn has been vastly increased in the past few years.

So you can see by these facts the awful hardships that have been imposed by the flood at this particular time, although the United States has mobilized some of its private groups to help. The National Catholic Welfare Council already has contributed about \$20,000, and the American Red Cross has given about \$40,000 to the International Red Cross for the purchase of blankets, and the promise of Mr. Harriman, the United States Director of Mutual Security, for medicines and other supplies for the flood victims has been given. In my opinion it is still very essential that everyone who can in Rhode Island contribute to the support of this relief program. I was informed while in Rome that the immediate need was for blankets, clothing (including shoes), and certain types of medicines such as penicillin, streptomycin, chloromycin, to prevent the spread of disease. All of this takes money.

When the immediate problem has been met there will be another long-range problem, that of getting the people back into homes--helping them to get back on their feet, not only to help themselves but to help supply the much needed agricultural products to the population of the entire country of Italy.

I think the terrible, over-all situation can be explained by the example of one family who had a little farm in this area when the water started to rise at night. As soon as they realized that it was a serious threat, they awakened their two small grandchildren and asked them to get up and get dressed and to drive their few cows to higher ground.

The sad thing about it is that the children never returned. The grandparents, the following morning, found that the whole area was submerged by water. They finally had to move to the second floor and later out onto the roof; there they discovered everything they owned had been swept away including the grandchildren and the cows, and their house was the only thing left standing. Rescue was made by boat only after they had gone three days and three nights without food. This story undoubtedly was repeated over and over again in the cases of many other families.

In view of these facts and figures concerning this terrible calamity, and knowing the people of Rhode Island as I do, to be generous at all time to those in need, I am sure that everyone who can will contribute what they can to the Rhode Island Committee for Italian Flood Relief. This committee has set up permanent headquarters at the Aurora Civic Association, 289 Broadway, Providence, Rhode Island.

In closing I appeal to everyone, in the cause of humanity, to donate as much as they possibly can for this most worthy cause.