



TILLAMOOK
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Worst storm in memory

Ken O'Toole and Denise Porter
Headlight-Herald Staff

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Houses along McDonald Road and the Nehalem River in Nehalem were battered by several log jams. Denise Porter/Headlight-Herald photo

TILLAMOOK COUNTY - It was the storm that started before it was expected and lasted longer than anyone would have dreamed.

Old-timers in Tillamook County said the hurricane-force winds, heavy rains and record flooding from Sunday morning through late Monday afternoon of this week and beyond was the worst in memory. With countywide devastation that was mirrored in other coastal counties in Oregon and Washington, came an electrical power outage that affected 75 percent of Tillamook PUD customers at the storm's peak, resulted in at least two deaths, downed countless trees and power lines atop homes and vehicles and flooded homes, businesses and farms. Land and cell phone service was either spotty or, in some cases, nonexistent. Long-distance phone service was reportedly affected by a severed fiberoptic phone cable in a hard-to-access location in a flood-swollen creek, north of Mill Creek Road, off of SR 22.

Rainfall recorded at KTIL radio station Sunday was nearly 2 inches. On Monday, it was just over 5 inches.

Tillamook County was, essentially, an island, with access north, south and east blocked by downed trees and flood waters. Even the flood detour route to north of Tillamook, the Wilson River Loop, was closed to all traffic for a time Monday. As the river lowered, higher-profile vehicles were allowed, and finally standard-sized vehicles.

Monday afternoon, travelers inquiring whether they could get through to Portland were told it wasn't going to happen, and that they'd better look for overnight accommodations.

Tillamook 9-1-1 received 675 emergency calls in a 24-hour period at the height of the storm. Crews from Tillamook PUD, county Public Works, police and fire personnel worked up to 30 continuous hours, many finally pausing for a brief night's sleep Monday, rising early to resume their efforts to repair storm damage throughout the county. Monday afternoon, it was estimated that 170 first responders, PUD and Public Works workers - including U.S. Coast Guard personnel from Station Tillamook Bay in Garibaldi - had been out doing damage control since 9 a.m. Sunday. Wind gusts of more than 100 mph were reported along the Oregon Coast, with a reading at 94 mph at Bay City, according to the National Weather Service. A reading in the high 80s was unofficially reported at Garibaldi. A blast of wind at 87 mph was noted at Rockaway Beach Monday afternoon. A wind gust of 105 mph was recorded Sunday morning at Cape Meares as the storm was beginning. The crab fleet, anticipating the worst of weather conditions, stayed in port at the start of the crabbing season.

Many compared part of the flooding to that of the epic flood of February 1996. According to the National Weather Service, the Wilson and Nestucca rivers reached levels higher than those of 11 years ago.

The Nestucca near Beaver reached 18.2 feet in 1996, and crested at 20 feet around 5 p.m. Monday. Flood stage is at 18 feet, and the river fell below this stage Tuesday morning. The Wilson near Tillamook, which reached 18.4 feet in 1996, has a flood stage of 12 feet and crested at 20.5 feet late Monday morning.

In addition, the Trask near Tillamook has a flood stage of 16.5 feet and crested at 20.8 feet mid morning Monday. The Nehalem near Foss has a flood stage of 14 feet, and crested at 24.4 feet at midnight Monday.

Declaration of emergency

Tillamook County Commissioners declared a state of emergency in the county Monday, citing the heavy winds, rain, flooding and power outages from Sunday, Dec. 2 through Tuesday. The declaration noted localized flooding along the Wilson, Trask, Nehalem

and Nestucca rivers, as well as their smaller tributaries. Gov. Ted Kulongoski also declared a statewide emergency, which clears the way for the state to provide assistance to affected communities without them having to request it.

People frequently noted the calming influence of Sheriff Todd Anderson's periodic briefings on local radio, and County Commissioners Mark Labhart, Charles Hurliman and Tim Josi were everywhere, surveying damage, helping coordinate efforts and offering assurance. Josi even volunteered to help a county roads crew clear debris from Bay Ocean Road Monday.

Storm recedes, impact lingers

As emergency personnel and other public service representatives comprising the county's Incident Command Team gathered at Tillamook 9-1-1 for a briefing Tuesday afternoon, there was some bad news, some good news, and a realization that much recovery work remained.

A 54-year old resident of Vermilyea Road, off Miami Foley Road, was in her pickup on the nearby Shiffman Road when it was swept into the river just before 11 a.m. Monday. Eyewitnesses say Teresa Hurliman was driving across a flooded section of the road, turning to miss a large stump in the road, when the truck left the road. A nearby front-loader operator reportedly was unsuccessful in a rescue attempt. She was swept away into the river. The empty truck was recovered in the river the next day.

A second storm-connected death was that of a 90-year-old Tillamook woman who suffered what County medical examiner Dr. Paul Betlinski called a "weather-related heart attack" as she prepared to evacuate.

Another death occurring during the storm period involved a 74-year-old Tierra del Mar woman, Laura Janet Steyaert, who died when her husband, Ray Steyaert Sr., accidentally backed their car over her while she was standing in their yard, according to the Sheriff's Office.

Many of the roads blocked during the storm are now open to traffic. Much of U.S. 101 through the county was open, as was U.S. 6, SR 131, SR 22, the Miami Foley Road and more.

Some businesses along U.S. 101 North in Tillamook fared worse than during last year's November flood, while others received minimal damage in comparison.

Jennifer Rockwood, office manager of Hayward Auto said the damages sustained this year are comparable to those of last year.

One of the major issues the car company faced was the lack of phone service.

"We have a really good flood evacuation plan for the cars, but having no phones really messed that up," she said.

Company employees spent four hours early Monday morning moving vehicles to the Tillamook County Fairgrounds. The wind, however, was so fierce, the showroom doors could not be kept safely open. Cars inside were left to face the water.

"Last year we incurred \$175,000 in damages. We will exceed that," Rockwood said.

Especially irritating to Rockwood was the damage to the company's new brake repair room. "We just finished remodeling it from last year's flood. It was completed last week."

Across the road at Rosenberg Builders Supply, owner Loten Hooley sighed with relief. After nearly half a million dollars in damages last year, the sales building was dry.

"I'm just tickled," he said about the small amount of damage his buildings sustained. "We may even be cleaned up today."

Hooley said most of his damage was from the wind. The purchase of three 6-inch pumps, plus an additional two more rented ones kept most of the water from the store. Hooley said the pumps barely kept up with the water and he would probably purchase more.

Grunder's Repair saw less water in the building, but the damages were still substantial. "I can't tell you how much money we are looking at," Meagan Streeter said. "How do you count the time lost to clean up before you can even reopen for business?" Streeter said her family has owned the business three years, and sustained two major floods.

Tilda Chadwick Jones, speaking for Tillamook Bay Habitat and Estuary Improvement District, said a number of other businesses along North Main in Tillamook suffered some water damage, including Grunder Equipment Repair and Carquest. Water flowed over the Shilo levee for the first time, she said, with some water reaching the Shilo Inn.

The Blue Heron, she said, took in some water, but all the animals survived, and some were evacuated. She said Tuesday it is expected to open within a few days.

At the height of the flooding, the U.S. Coast Guard used a rubber craft to transport people across the flooded section of North Main.

The Northport Plaza, which was elevated this year, with the help of Federal Emergency Management Agency funds, escaped water damage, although water rose to the "third or fourth step," Jones said.

West of Tillamook, residents of Netarts, Oceanside and Cape Meares were coping with an extended power outage that began Sunday evening, and was still unresolved Wednesday morning.

According to Rick Adams, Tillamook Fire Chief, the power loss in Netarts was reducing the available water supply.

North County

In Garibaldi, the wind devastation was apparent, as several residential trailers were turned on their sides, boats were tossed askew at the waterfront, and numerous trees were reported on buildings and vehicles. Windows were smashed in, as was the case at Sundance Trading Company, along Garibaldi Avenue, and roofing material was torn from a church.

At Rockaway Beach, according to Mayor Lisa Phipps, "There were a lot of downed trees but minimal flooding."

The Fire Department here was open to provide shelter, warmth and food, as was the case throughout the county.

North County residents were still without electrical power late Tuesday. The main fear, according to Wheeler Mayor Rich Hendricks, is that the weather would turn cold, leaving residents vulnerable to the cold before power is restored. The Nehalem Valley Care Center was running on a diesel-powered generator with limited supplies.

A truckload of diesel for the center is of primary importance, he said. As of Tuesday, the 368 phone prefix was working, but long distance and cell phone coverage was not.

Hendricks said he heard the Salmonberry bridge had collapsed taking with it one of the major fiberoptic lines available for phones. The bridge collapse has been confirmed by county emergency officials.

Nehalem residents along the Nehalem River were running low on fresh water and Sheriff's Office personnel were working to bring in water supplies.

Impact on farms

Farmers in Central County lost electricity and suffered delays in getting cows milked. Many barns saw substantial damage. A central part of the barn belonging to the Rodriques and Rider families on Tone Road collapsed. No cows were hurt.

Cows were evacuated from Butch Schriber's farm and farms along the Wilson saw high water, but not nearly the extent of damage seen last November.

Cows were stranded in parts of Nehalem. There is no report yet on any number of animals lost due to drowning. The water was still too high Tuesday to determine loss. Dairy farmer Richard Woodward's heifer barn collapsed after the poles snapped. The barn moved nearly 10 feet to one side before falling, he said. One heifer perished, but nearly 100 more were saved. It was reported that flood waters there were about 1 foot lower than at the peak of last winter's flooding.

South County farmers had electricity restored at various times Tuesday and Wednesday. Many farmers who had generators found the machines were not working correctly and uncomfortable bovines were left without being milked.

Karl Hale of Cloverdale said his brand new \$15,000 generator failed and he was left with a smaller older model that could only milk three cows at a time. After 14 hours, the farmer had only milked two-thirds of his 280 cows. High-producing cows must be milked twice per day or their udders become too full, and the cows can become sick, he explained. Evacuation plans were made to truck the heaviest producers to Dave Hale's Hebo farm. After 15 trailer loads, each of the cows had been milked.

Other dairies lost significant portions of roofs, and one farmer near Pacific City lost an entire calf barn.

Power down, shelters open

At the Incident Command Team briefing Tuesday noon, Department of Emergency Management Director Tom Manning reported that the county still had widespread power outages, with trees and power lines still down. While South County's electrical power was expected to be restored soon, it was still unknown when North County would be back on line, he said.

By then, he said, the rivers were receding, and the National Weather Service had canceled flood warnings for the county.

The Tillamook County Fair Ground shelter had processed 58 people by that time, and 16 were still sleeping over, he said.

As darkness neared late Monday afternoon, shadows crossed the faces of the several dozen people at the 4-H dorm hall. They were clustered in groups, talking quietly or saying nothing at all. The power had gone out, and something was wrong with the generator. Here and there, a battery-operated lantern shone through.

Before long, they were lining up for a varied and plentiful buffet of food supplied by a local restaurant. The restaurant people came and left quietly, and no one was quite sure of their identity, but they were grateful for the gesture.

Some of those at the shelter were from the Wilson River RV Park and Trask River Mobile Home Park, both adjacent to rivers and susceptible to flooding in extreme conditions.

The Fairgrounds shelter opened by Red Cross at 5 a.m. Monday. The county Health Department's Dr. Betlinski visited the shelter three times to deal with medical issues.

Joann Brown of Bay City and her mother, Joan Brown sat at a table dimly illuminated by two fluorescent lanterns. Two decks of playing cards stacked nearby would be the evening's entertainment.

Headed back from a birthday celebration, the pair was stranded in Tillamook Monday night. Passage to Bay City was blocked by flooding.

They were in Safeway, and someone overheard them wondering aloud what they were going to do. Someone suggested the shelter. They were glad to be there, but Joann couldn't help lamenting that here it was her birthday, and she was spending it in a shelter.

Jim Ruth and Barbara Davis had been evacuated from the Wilson River RV Park, Peter Courtenay from Trask River Mobile Home Park. All were veterans of flooding. Courtenay kept a packed bag and sleeping bags handy for evacuation. He was ready. Ruth and Davis were able to evacuate in the pre-dawn hours that morning with only minimal possessions. Having each lost a trailer in last year's flooding at the park, they feared the worst.

In all, though, emergency responders were better prepared than during last year's flood, according to county officials.

Commissioner Labhart noted the volunteer efforts of ordinary citizens in helping clear debris and responding to other emergencies, as well as the long hours put in by work crews.

He pointed out one thing that may be now apparent to most county residents - that basics such as electrical power and the ability to freely travel are "things we take for granted - until we lose them."

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