

Flood waters ravage state of Colorado

Written by Brenda Johnson Brandt

Conditions in much of Colorado went from drought to flooding this past week.

It all began Wednesday, Sept. 11 when torrential rains triggered flooding in Boulder and Larimer counties starting early Thursday morning.

By Tuesday night, Sept. 17, or Wednesday morning, Sept. 18, the South Platte overflow was expected to hit Sedgwick County and move on in to Nebraska in the next couple of days.

The search for people stranded from the Rocky Mountain foothills to the plains of northeastern Colorado grew more difficult Sunday, Sept. 15, with a new wave of rain threatening to hamper airlifts from the flooded areas still out of reach.

Morgan County Sheriff James Crone told KMGH-TV a bridge had collapsed Saturday and the raging South Platte River divided the area.

The advantage for those in northeast Colorado has been the advance warning that the flood waters are coming—a luxury the Colorado foothills communities were not afforded.

By Sunday afternoon, the South Platte water overflowed at Merino and moved steadily eastward to Sterling.

Mid-morning Monday it was reported that no one was getting into or out of Sterling. The waters flooded the area on the east edge of Sterling near the Overland Trail Museum, crossing Highway 6 at that point.

Very early Tuesday morning, residents of Crook and those on the north side of Colorado Highway 138 were evacuated as the South Platte waters threatened.

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Holyoke moisture totals from Sept. 11-16 resulted in 2.33 inches. Rainfall details from Sept. 11-15 showed a low of .27 of an inch on Thursday up to .71 of an inch recorded Sunday.



Water escaped the South Platte River basin last weekend, flooding Fort Morgan and beyond. North of I-76 in Fort Morgan, the Comfort Inn, at right in the background, and Maverick's, at far left, are pictured Sunday afternoon, Sept. 15 with the water still rolling down the roadways. The flood waters were expected to reach Sedgwick County, 30 miles north of Holyoke, Tuesday evening, Sept. 17, heading toward Nebraska.□□

—Enterprise photo

Flood warnings begin Sept. 11

Authorities said Thursday, Sept. 12 that heavy rains caused flash flooding in Boulder County, closing streets, triggering mudslides and prompting evacuations.

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Early Thursday, some residents of Jamestown and the Fourmile Canyon areas, as well as dozens of students at the University of Colorado were being urged to evacuate because of the high waters.

Up to 8 inches fell in an area spanning from the Wyoming border south to the foothills west of Denver. Flooding extended all along the Front Range mountains, including the cities of Colorado Springs, Denver, Fort Collins, Greeley, Aurora and Boulder.

Flooding resulted from the St. Vrain, Thompson, Cache la Poudre and South Platte rivers.

Boulder County appeared to be the hardest hit. Sheriff Joe Pelle said the town of Lyons was completely cut off because of flooded roads, and residents were huddling together on higher ground.

Some of the flooding was exacerbated by wildfire “burn scars” that have spawned flash floods all summer in the mountains. That was particularly true near Jamestown in an area scarred by fire in 2010 and another near Colorado Springs’ Waldo Canyon that was hit in 2012.

At the University of Colorado, about 400 students in a dorm were evacuated, and administrators canceled classes at least through Friday. About a quarter of the school’s buildings have some kind of water damage.

The CU Buff football game with Fresno State, scheduled in Boulder Sept. 14, was postponed.

The overflowing St. Vrain River cut the town of Longmont in half.

President Barack Obama signed an emergency declaration Thursday night, freeing federal aid and allowing the Federal Emergency Management Agency to coordinate disaster relief efforts.

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In Estes Park, 20 miles from Lyons, comparisons were drawn to two historic and disastrous flash floods: the Big Thompson Canyon Flood of 1976 that killed 145 people, and the Lawn Lake Flood of 1982 that killed three.

“Take those times 10. That’s what it looks like in the canyon,” said Deyn Johnson, owner of the Whispering Pines Cottages, three of which floated down the river after massive amounts of water were released from the town’s dam.

Where the river had receded in Estes Park Saturday, it had left behind up to a foot of mud.

Major roads were washed away, small towns like Glen Haven were reduced to debris, and key infrastructure like gas lines and sewer systems were destroyed.

The Little Thompson River spilled over its banks in Milliken, where seven freight cars were on their sides where the tracks ran along the river.

As rescue efforts continued, flood waters from the South Platte River peaked near Kersey Saturday morning, washing out major parts of Highway 34.

The Cache la Poudre River near Greeley reached its highest peak Saturday at about 4:30 p.m.

Saturday, the floodwaters moved toward Fort Morgan, with evacuations ordered for Goodrich, Orchard, Muir Springs and Weldona.

The water surged at Fort Morgan Saturday evening, peaking at a record 24.66 feet, and all roads crossing the river were closed.

The South Platte was flowing over some bridges in Sterling Sunday, and around 100 people

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were evacuated between Atwood and Sterling.

Julesburg will be the final Colorado town to experience the floodwaters, with the river running three-quarters of a mile outside of town.

Governor John Hickenlooper and members of Colorado's congressional delegation took time out from an aerial survey of massive flood damage Saturday to chip in on the rescue effort.

He said the pilot was able to land the helicopter on a small spit of land next to the raging Big Thompson River, and they picked up six stranded people, a dog and a cat.

Hickenlooper was to meet with Federal Emergency Management Agency Administrator Craig Fugate Monday to discuss how FEMA is responding.

"Our bridges are broken. Our roads are broken. Our spirits are not broken," said Hickenlooper.

Meanwhile, the Nebraska Emergency Management Agency is sending a team to Ogallala, Neb., Wednesday, Sept. 18, to work with local emergency managers along the South Platte in response to potential flooding from the heavy rains that fell in Colorado.

Death toll reaches 8

As of Monday, Sept. 16, the number of people who have died as a result of the massive flooding in Colorado reached eight.

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It was also reported Monday that close to 19,000 homes have been damaged, with 1,600 destroyed. The number of people unaccounted for climbed over 1,200, but that was down to 658 Monday afternoon.

The American Red Cross is supporting rescue operations in Colorado by providing food, shelter, relief supplies and comfort to thousands of people forced from their homes. Meanwhile, numerous shelters remain open across the state to serve those displaced by flooding.

Health advisory given for contact with rivers

Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment is advising Coloradans residing in northeast Colorado including Adams, Boulder, Broomfield, Larimer, Morgan, Logan, Sedgwick and Weld counties to reduce health risks by avoiding contact with rivers and streams that may contain contaminants.

Due to the severe flooding, rivers and streams may be contaminated with partially treated sewage and other wastewater due to power failures and damage to wastewater treatment systems.

Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment advises residents or visitors in these counties to:

—keep out of rivers and streams until further notice.

—do not allow children or pets to play in the water, nor allow children to play with toys that have

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been in contact with the water.

—individuals who come in contact with the water or are involved in cleaning up flood debris should practice good personal hygiene and wash their hands frequently with soap and clean, warm water.

—if a person is exposed to the water and has open wounds or begins to feel ill with diarrhea or vomiting, he or she should contact a physician for guidance and inquire about receiving tetanus/diphtheria inoculations.

—agricultural workers who come in contact with such waters should practice good personal hygiene and wash their hands frequently with soap and clean, warm water.

AP news reports contributed to this story.

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