

Sandbags bring city, county, community together

City assessing drainage areas, fire chief said



Rocket-Miner Photo/Cody Greenwald

Hundreds came out on Wednesday to the city garages on Community Park Drive to help prepare for the worst with dirt and bags.



Rocket-Miner Photo/Cody Greenwald

Guen Tyler volunteers on her birthday to bag up dirt in effort to prevent more citywide damage from flooding on Wednesday at the city garages off Community Park Drive.



Rocket-Miner Photo/Cody Greenwald

Lissie Tipton ties up one more bag during the volunteer excavation to help protect residents in case of future flooding.



Rocket-Miner Photo/Cody Greenwald

Volunteers filled countless bags with dirt on Wednesday in case of more flooding. The Sublette County Emergency Management Office also brought over a sandbagging unit, which was able to speed up work.



Rocket-Miner Photo/Cody Greenwald

Robbie Foster shovels dirt into bags Wednesday. Eight-year-old Robbie said he came out with his dad to help keep the floodwaters at bay.

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CITY CLEANUP

Garbage dumps have been placed around downtown to collect any debris from Tuesday's flood, Rock Springs Human Resources Director Kara Beech said Wednesday evening.

"They're doing a rough amount of cleanup to try and make sure the roads are clear," she said.

The dumpsters are there for anybody to dispose of flood and storm litter.

Since the waters have struck Rock Springs, city departments have been working around the clock to clean up or help residents, Beech said. The city water, streets, fire, police and housing departments have been maxed out.

"Right now everybody is on call with the city, but there are several individuals who are still out tonight that if the storm does hit they can start working," Beech said. "Our housing department was working until 10 p.m. last night, making sure our residents are OK."

NEED SANDBAGS?

Volunteers have been working with the city of Rock Springs, Sweetwater County and the **Bureau of Land Management** to provide sandbags of dirt to whoever needs them to prevent any future flooding at the city garages on Community Park Drive, off Elk Street. People began digging and filling bags early Wednesday.

POWER OUTAGE

During the Tuesday storm and flood, 247 Rock Springs residents were affected from a power outage at 4:41 p.m., Rocky Mountain Power Media Relations Margaret Oler said. The outage was caused by lightning, and the power was restored by 6:30 p.m.

ROCK SPRINGS -- A gush of water and a mound of dirt brought many together Wednesday afternoon.

Hundreds of people got their hands dirty before the clouds rolled in, digging into dirt and filling bags as an effort to secure buildings that previously flooded in Rock Springs.

Volunteers like Sarah Register, a kindergarten teacher, helped throughout most of the day.

Once the wind began to blow around 3 p.m., much of the storm fizzled out over southern Rock Springs, Meteorologist Ralph Estell said.

"The storm came up from the Utah area and had a good thunderstorm going, but then it weakened," said Estell who works for the National Weather Service in Riverton.

While Rock Springs was not hit with a storm as severe as Tuesday evening, which caused flooding, Estell said the city will remain under a flash flood watch until midnight -- Thursday morning. After that, the worst part should be over.

PREVENTION MANAGEMENT

Along with many volunteers, Rock Springs water, streets, fire and police departments, Sweetwater County Emergency Management, the **Bureau of Land Management** and Rock Springs Chamber of Commerce all worked to take precaution in case of more rain.

"The streets and water departments have been working nonstop," said Rock Springs Fire Chief Jim Wamsley. "The streets department worked through the night on Monday to get things cleaned up from the previous storm, and then it started all over again on Tuesday."

Sweetwater County dispatchers also endured a heavy wave of callers and worked hard to get people the help they needed, he said.

"We think a lot of the flooding yesterday was caused by a drainage system that isn't part of an existing retention," Wamsley said Wednesday. "We believe it came from out of the county somewhere."

By around 2 p.m., the BLM fire crew, county workers, fire department and inmate workers were using a sandbagging unit that was able to fill 1,000 bags per hour. Sublette County Emergency Management Office brought the unit over to help out.

"I don't know how many thousands (of bags) we've gone through, but we've gone through a lot," Rock Springs Chamber of Commerce CEO Dave Hanks said. "I think we're caught up."

BETTER SAFE THAN WET

Volunteers such as Lissie Tipton started bagging dirt at noon Wednesday at the city garage on Community Park Drive, located off Elk Street.

"I saw a post online, and I came down here to help," Tipton said. "I've been here ever since."

Helping community members in need was why Richard Tijerina said he and his son Jaden were out digging in the dirt.

These and more came out to help those like Steve Pacheco, who came to load up some bags after his house flooded Tuesday.

Volunteer Chelise McKnight described Wednesday afternoon as "everyone helping everyone."

Memorial Hospital of Sweetwater County Volunteer Supervisor Janae Gale said she put a pause on work to come bag dirt.

"I just called my boss and asked if I could come out and help," Gale said. "Seeing everyone out here really shows the true heart of Rock Springs people."

Many volunteers, including those from Infinity Power and Controls, also brought sandbags around town to many businesses.

When asked why he decided to come and help bag sand, 8-year-old Ronnie Foster said, "I wanted to help my dad get some sand just in case of a flood."

ASSESSMENTS NEEDED

The city has been assessing the many drainage systems throughout town since the flood, Wamsley said.

Moving forward, he said question is: "How can we look at a few measures that maybe were overlooked?"

"The knee-jerk reaction is to look at the drainage systems every year to make sure debris isn't building up," he said.

When the water starts to come, debris from the twigs and branches at the tops of mountains is difficult to predict.

"Unless we take a mower and cut everything down along the hills every year, I don't know I can say we'll ever be safe from this," Wamsley said. "On one hand, the (natural debris) flows into drains, on the other hand it's good for topsoil."

Drainage systems such as the one at Gobel Street with Dead Horse Canyon Creek receives natural debris all the time -- it's nature's way of clearing it out, Wamsley said.

INFRASTRUCTURE IN QUESTION

It is likely that the city will have future conversations with engineers in order to see what new measures can be taken in cases of too much rain, he said.

However, it's very difficult to predict how much infrastructure is needed to ensure flooding won't occur, Water Reclamation Superintendent Mike Gaviotis said. Following the flood, several sewer systems have overflowed.

"We're assessing everything right now," Gaviotis said. "With certain things like this there is not a heck of a lot you can do."

The sewer line had much more water than it can handle, and reclamation workers had to mend one private line that was breached east of town, he said.

"Right now, at the wastewater plant, we're inundated," Gaviotis said. "We're trying to assess the system. I've got mud -- I've got problems."

When things get bad enough, there is only so much that the city can do, Gaviotis said.

"All of us -- the police, water (department) -- looked at all of the places that potentially could cause flooding before the storm hit Tuesday and said, 'I think we're OK.'" He said. "Then all of a sudden we got this bug gush."