

A big sigh of relief

Virgin River rises to 2 1/2 feet below flood levels

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ST. GEORGE -- Washington County avoided serious flooding Saturday because temperatures hovered low enough to prevent snowpack from melting.

County officials had shored up banks and warned residents in anticipation of the Pacific Ocean storm. The primary concerns were the precarious banks and the temporary access roads in Gunlock and Enterprise.

"Today we can relax, but there's more rain to come and probably more flooding," Washington County Sheriff Kirk Smith said at a news conference Saturday.

With unusually high snowpack and more than a month of winter remaining, the danger of flooding will loom at least through May, Smith said.

The National Weather Service ended its hazardous weather watch Saturday morning as rains subsided and rivers and streams reached their peaks for the day.

The Virgin River rose to 12 1/2 feet. Flood stage, is 15 feet, National Weather Service meteorologist Dan Brown said.

Friday and Saturday, Toquerville received about 1.4 inches of rain, Zion Canyon received 1.62 inches and St. George received 0.79 inches. White Reef, near Leeds, received 1.36 inches while Cedar Breaks received one foot of snow, which equates to 2.2 inches of water.

Because of muddy conditions, county officials closed some roads in the Gunlock area and discouraged travel between Veyo and Enterprise.

Gunlock resident Roxanne Aplanalp said area residents on Saturday dredged along the river and built a berm. While water levels were higher than usual, the river stayed in its new channel, she said.

"As long as this southern strain of moisture persists, we're very vulnerable," County Commissioner Jim Eardley said.

The flooding that occurred Jan. 10 and 11 caused \$145 million in public damage and \$80 million in private damage. Twenty-eight homes in St. George and Santa Clara were destroyed by flood waters and another 26 were damaged.



Jerel Harris / The Spectrum

Terry Schramm clears debris from the drain on 100 South on Saturday.



Jerel Harris / The Spectrum

An abandoned pet fish attempts to make its way down the drainage system inside the 700 East block of 100 South Saturday afternoon.

Smith said residents are encouraged to leave sandbags in place.

The county's priorities for repair from January floods are centered in Santa Clara and St. George, especially to protect sewer and water lines, Eardley said. Another priority is removing debris from Santa Clara to the Gunlock Dam.

The National Resources Conservation Service will award bids Monday for contractors to begin building walls to stabilize river banks, Eardley said. Starting early next week, workers will haul about 6,400 cubic yards of rock per day for about 6 months.

Smith said there may be road closures as crews move the rocks; deputies will cite people who disregard road closures.

"All the work we've done since Jan. 10 has basically been duct tape to get us by. The real repair work is starting now," Smith said.

The county has received \$6 million from the NRCS to begin repairs. Eardley said officials are hoping Congress will appropriate additional money, although that may not be until fall.

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