

Anatomy of a flood: How a a three-day flood receded in Reno-Sparks

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Student employee Mallory Goodrick feeds livestock after they were returned to the University of Nevada, Reno Farm following the flooding of the Truckee River this past weekend on Jan. 10, 2017. (Photo: JASON BEAN/RGJ, RENO GAZETTE-JOURNAL-USA TODAY NETWORK) Buy Photo

For four days, 400 cattle stood in the thick brown mud on higher ground. They were wet, cold and tired from the two-mile saunter from flood-prone fields of the University of Nevada, Reno main farm station off east McCarran Boulevard in Reno.

Bo Kindred knows all too well that cows walk slowly.

It was the third time in three months that he, some students and the cattle made the trek from the university's farm in southeast Reno to what is known as Dairy Hill, a three-acre plot that is considered safe, but cramped, ground for livestock when there's a threat of a flood.

The two previous storms had failed to deliver the expected wallop. This one was different.

Over the last week, what officials called a "perfect storm" overwhelmed Northern Nevada. It filled homes with water, left roads washed out and shut schools and state offices. The recovery is still ongoing as storms and snow continue to test the region.

The threat started a week ago when city and county officials warned of the dangers being set up by a weather system that would dump precipitation while temperatures rose. The Truckee River would flood.

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By Friday, Jan. 6, an official emergency command center was operational. Reno and Sparks mayors pleaded with residents to stay home and away from water.

That's when Kindred, who started working at the university farm bordered by the Truckee River and McCarran Boulevard while in college in 1996, made the decision to move his animals



Livestock is brought back to the University of Nevada, Reno Farm and fed following the flooding of the Truckee River this past weekend on Jan. 10, 2017. (Photo: JASON BEAN/RGJ, RENO GAZETTE-JOURNAL-USA TODAY NETWORK)

A storm that could change your life

Kindred, now an assistant director of the station, oversees an operation that includes beef cattle and 50 sheep. Some cows are sold and some butchered and sold through Wolf Pack meats, a processing plant. Others are part of university research on nutrition and vaccines. Sheep are used by agricultural students, who are taught how to care for the animals.

Eight-hundred low-lying acres that are home to the cattle and sheep were likely to flood.

Reno, Sparks and Washoe County declared states of emergency. Gov. Brian Sandoval vowed state support including from the National Guard.

“What you do during this storm could change your life,” said Washoe County Sheriff Chuck Allen.

Kindred remembers the 2005 flood when 400 sheep drowned.

“It was tragic,” Kindred said. “We had other fields that were flooding and put those sheep in a field that wasn’t flooding. There were about 10 of us in the field trying to get the sheep in rising knee-deep water after a levee broke.”

“We were grabbing sheep and dragging them out,” he said. “We never expected that field to flood, but when it got dark we knew we couldn’t do anything. We knew it would be bad overnight.”

For the Collins family, being trapped creates worries beyond a full pantry.

The family’s 5-year-old son Jimmy suffers from life-threatening seizures.

“We made some pretty intensive plans for how we’d care for Jimmy if we got cut off,” Collins said. She said it included making sure they had enough of the food for Jimmy's special diet, printed recipes instead of relying on the computer and plans if an ambulance was needed but the bridge was closed.

By Saturday night, snow melted across the city. Rain began to fall.

No knowing what to expect

It was still raining Sunday morning when people flocked to downtown Reno and neighborhood parks along the river to see the rushing water.

“We don’t know what to expect,” said Jason Sterrett of Northern Nevada Juniors Volleyball.

His volleyball studio is in the heart of industrial Sparks, where officials said floodwaters could be the worst.

“There’s a lot of activity down here. Everyone is waiting to see.”

Sparks officials feared its industrial area would be hard hit.

“We are worried,” said Sparks spokesman Adam Mayberry.

Sparks announced it would close many streets in the city by 1 p.m.

As Sunday turned to late afternoon, roads began to flood and close around the area. Toll Road in south Reno became a river surrounded by large pools of water and mud.

“It’s like a kayak park here,” said Reno resident Jodi Tenenbaum, who worked with neighbors Sunday in Caughlin Ranch to fill sandbags



A picture of Jodi Tenebaum's backyard in Caughlin Ranch on Sunday, Jan. 8, 2017 (Photo: Provided to the RGJ)

She watched her backyard fill with water.

“We were well prepared overall but had a lot of challenges” said Washoe County manager John Slaughter Sunday. “I’ll sleep tonight, but who knows what to expect when we wake up.”

While many slept as floodwaters reached peak levels and crested, Steve Coltra worked.

The foreman for Q&D Construction was stationed on an excavator on downtown’s Sierra Street Bridge.

“It’s a big arm,” said Coltra, who worked overnight Sunday into Monday, clearing debris and trees from the flowing river. He estimates he grabbed the equivalent of 100 trees.

“I was pulling out large trees, some 40 feet,” said Coltra, who would have just seconds upon seeing something in the river before he grabbed it with a large claw.

He said the force of the river surprised him.

“You could feel the backend of the machine lift off the ground,” he said as he dipped into the raging river over and over again.

“Put the bucket too far in there and the whole thing could tip in the water,” he said.



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Red Cross volunteer Alix Txe (Photo: Siobhan McAndrew/RGJ)

Alix Txe woke up at Wooster High early Monday morning.

Txe, an American Red Cross volunteer, started nearly 24 hours earlier helping people check in to a shelter at the high school off Plumb Lane in Reno.

The shelter filled to more than 200 people when volunteers, city officials and police tried to warn homeless living along the Truckee River.

“People who are homeless are in a constant state of emergency,” said Txe.

Txe stayed through the shelter closing at 7 p.m. as city and county officials praised efforts and started assessing damaged areas.

“For some people now, leaving the shelter, they are back in a state of emergency, even if nothing big happened with the flood,” Txe said. “Now they go back out into uncertain weather.”

The storm left some families feeling trapped.

Pam Berek’s street off Toll Road in south Reno has not been passable since storms washed away dirt roads in her neighborhood.

On a private road, Berek said the wheelchair van she uses to transport her teenage son won’t make the trip.

Even the Washoe County School District told Berek the road wasn’t drivable so her son, Carson, has not been to school.

“Even once these storm pass, the damage has been done,” she said. “The road has too much damage now.”

For animals, weather can be stressful.

“We wanted to get the cattle home as soon as possible,” said UNR’s Kindred.

He woke up early Tuesday morning to start moving the 400 cattle back home.

“They are tired and hungry,” he said. “But everything with this went as it should.”



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