

Floods of 1993: deluged again

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Floods of 1993: deluged again

May 29, 2020

The stage was set for the 1993 floods when the weather pattern shifted in December 1992, and started coming from the Pacific Ocean instead of the normal Gulf of Alaska origination point. Then the new year brought more rain.

Average monthly rainfall in December and January is about an inch, but in December 1992 it totaled an official 3.47 inches, only to be followed by nearly 5 inches in January causing the second major flood in the area in less than 10 years.

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“In a two week period the area was hit with several Pacific storm systems, which produced the wettest January on record and widespread flooding across the metro area,” the National Weather Service’s Tucson office stated in naming the 1993 floods the second most significant weather event of the 20th century.

January 8, 1993: Floods strand residents on northeast side

More than an inch of rain fell in the Tucson area Thursday, January 7 — causing washes and creeks to overflow, preventing residents from reaching up to 1,000 northeast-side homes, and prompting the rescue of numerous motorists from county washes.

No serious injuries were reported late last night, but county and city officials, in anticipation of serious flooding today, set up an emergency operations center.

The Tanque Verde Wash Thursday night was running 7 feet deep in some areas — one foot lower than when it overflowed during the massive flood that waterlogged the valley in 1983, said Capt. John Karolzak of the Rural Metro Fire Department.

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Motorists trying to get home in the area north and east of Houghton Road and Tanque Verde roads, were turned back, forcing them to arrange stays with friends or relatives or in hotels.

There were reports of flooding and stranded motorists in Avra Valley and the Marana area, according to the National Weather Service.

Rainfall as of 11 p.m. at Tucson International Airport was 1.19 inches, 0.92 of which had fallen since 5 p.m., according to the weather service. Mount Lemmon received more than 4 inches of snow yesterday and the Catalina Highway at milepost 6 was completely washed out, officials reported.

January 9, 1993: (all the following go under jan. 9)

Downpour is likely tonight, tomorrow

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A second storm is close on the heels of the one that soaked Tucson with 2.15 inches of rain January 7 and 8, said Randy Weber, a National Weather Service spokesman.

The new storm should arrive late today and remain through much of tomorrow, dumping an inch to 2 inches more on water-weary Tucson, he said.

Statewide, rains, which have hit the Verde and Salt rivers' watersheds the hardest — sending the Salt roaring through Phoenix at 150,000 cubic feet per second — are "a pretty rare event," said Chris Smith, a hydrologist in the U.S. Geological Survey's Tucson office. "In the Rillito, this was the second-largest flow on record."

Symington declares state of emergency

After a week's worth of rain flooded the state with up to 8 inches of rain, sending thousands of Arizonans fleeing homes and businesses, Gov. Fife Symington declared a state of emergency yesterday.

Bridges were damaged. Homes and businesses were flooded, sewage overflowed and power was out in spots throughout Arizona as residents braced for what could be the worse to come.

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In Clifton, near the New Mexico border, residents were reliving bad memories from the 1983 floods that devastated the town.

Yesterday, about half the town's 2,840 residents were evacuated or voluntarily left their homes along the cresting San Francisco River, which was sending debris-filled waters perilously close to the town's main bridge, said Town Manager Mark Fooks.

Rescuers help homeowners, as well as Humvee, horses

Neither Humvees nor horses were a match for yesterday's stormy weather.

"We're stuck! Stuck bad!" yelled Airman Michael Murphy seconds after he drove a Humvee, a not-quite-all-terrain military vehicle, into a flood-soaked bog near the raging waters of Sabino Creek.

Fortunately, the hamstrung Humvee was the only casualty of an aid mission in which several airmen from Davis-Monthan Air Force Base helped harried homeowners and rescued stranded horses in northeast-side neighborhoods.

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Their efforts were part of a countywide scramble to cope with flooding washes, surging rivers, closed streets and utility problems flushed upon the Tucson area by recent heavy rains.

Elsewhere around the valley, law enforcement officers, rescue teams, helicopter crews and thousands of residents did their best to stay above water and help others do the same.

Swollen Gila still threat to Winkelman

WINKELMAN — For the second straight night, authorities evacuated people from this mining town as the swollen Gila River continued to threaten their homes.

About half of the 250 residents evacuated Thursday night were returning to their homes last night when a power outage occurred, an earthen dike failed and authorities ordered them out again.

"A lot of people don't want to live down here anymore," said Mary Aranda as she tried to salvage belongings from her mud-splattered living room.

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The evacuation of 53 homes last night came just as people were venturing back into Winkelman Flats, a low-lying area separated from the rest of town by Arizona 77.

The dike here failed about two hours after officials 20 miles upstream at Coolidge Dam began releasing water from San Carlos Lake at 2,000 cubic feet per second, up from 1,500 cubic feet per second earlier in the day, said Carmen Corso, Gila County Emergency Services director.

A 1989 Interior Department report called Coolidge Dam the most dangerous federal dam in the nation. The dam is undergoing repairs, and its reservoir, San Carlos Lake, is being kept below 80 percent of capacity to keep the dam intact.

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The Gila ran past Winkelman late last night at about 3,000 cubic feet per second, or roughly twice its normal flow, Corso estimated.

January 10, 1993 — Opened roads bring families back together

Life across the city began returning to normal Saturday, January 9, as some previously flooded roads reopened, but Tucsonans kept an eye on water levels as they waited for a second wave of rain to hit.

Starting about midmorning, a new storm is expected to dump up to 2 inches of rain in some locations, including Pima County. A flood and flash-flood watch will be in effect statewide.

Residents on the northeast side who were kept from their homes by flooding on Friday were once again able to cross East Fort Lowell Road at Agua Caliente Wash yesterday afternoon.

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Army National Guard trucks ferried people across the Agua Caliente. By 2 p.m., residents were able to cross in their own vehicles, braving fast currents and water as deep as 2 feet in some spots.

Fort Lowell Road, narrowed to one lane, became the bridge reuniting families separated by the flood.

Louis Belden and his wife, Susie, were able to cross the wash yesterday morning and rejoin their five children, who range in age from 2 to 15.

Belden said he and his wife left at about 5:30 p.m. Thursday to get groceries. They were able to safely cross Agua Caliente at Tanque Verde. But half an hour later, the water had risen to an uncrossable level.

So they checked into a hotel and called the kids, putting 15-year-old Ian in charge.

Things went well the first night, Ian said. But Friday, he and his siblings were evacuated as a precaution by sheriff's deputies and taken to the Red Cross Shelter at Tanque Verde Elementary School, 2300 N. Tanque Verde Loop Road.

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He said no one was scared, not even his 2-year-old sister, Lindsey.

"It was pretty exciting," Ian said.

Many residents took advantage yesterday of the brief reprieve from the rain, riding horses or pedaling bicycles on muddy streets. One group of enterprising youngsters set up a stand across from Tanque Verde Elementary School advertising bikes for rent. One girl displayed a sign that read, "\$1.00 to the wash and back."

Across town on the city's northwest side, workers at Pima County's abandoned vehicle yard in the 5700 block of North Camino de la Tierra had no time to take a leisurely bike ride to check out the washes.

They were busy using a backhoe and tractor to pull junked cars from the northern edge of the property on the southern bank of the Rillito Creek.

"We lost about six cars so far," said Ronald Johnson, the owner of Hawkeye Enterprises, which is under contract to store abandoned cars for the county. **Floods of 1993: deluged again** SHARE THIS

Dozens of residents stood along muddy embankments, watching water race along the normally dry Rillito.

By midday, officials reopened most of the westside bridges over the Rillito and Santa Cruz rivers.

Roads were muddy in Rillito, a small community of mostly mobile homes and dirt roads just south of Marana, which so far has escaped flooding. Rillito suffered severe damage in the October 1983 flood.

Across the area, hundreds of motorists ignored barricades and signs alerting drivers that wash crossings were closed, authorities said. Although no cars were washed away and no one was reported stranded, the Pima County Sheriff's Department put deputies at flooded wash crossings to keep drivers out.

"It's been a big problem," said Sgt. Maggie Saravo, of the Sheriff's Department's Rincon District. "People are very angry about being kept from crossing washes."

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January 15, 1993 — Rain relents, could return on Sunday

The rain has stopped for now, but Tucson residents should be prepared for another wave beginning Sunday night, January 17 or Monday morning, January 18.

It's not over by a long shot, said Paul Bartolome, meteorological technician for the weather service.

Tucson has had 3.22 inches of rainfall since January 1. Normal rainfall at this time of year usually hovers around four-tenths of an inch, he said. Last year also was wetter than normal, with 16.42 inches of rain. The normal yearly average is 11.14 inches.

Bartolome said the new rains could last about a day and a half, but there is no way yet to predict their intensity.

However, it shouldn't take too much to cause problems with traffic and flooding.

"The ground's pretty well soaked right now," he noted.

January 19, 1993:

Rain again isolates northeast-side here

Rain Monday, January 18, again isolated about 2,500 residents on Tucson's northeast side, while the swollen Santa Cruz River caused evacuations south of Tucson as well as in the Marana area.

Tucson residents in the areas of Bel Aire, Forty-Niners Country Club Estates and La Cebadilla were encouraged to voluntarily evacuate to a shelter set up at Tanque Verde Elementary School by the American Red Cross, said a Pima County Sheriff's Department spokesman. The isolated areas fall between the Tanque Verde and Agua Caliente washes.

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National Weather Service specialist Paul Bartolome, in Tucson, said nearly 1 inch of rain fell in a span of 2½ hours yesterday afternoon at Tucson International Airport. As of 9 p.m., 1.32 inches had fallen for the day, he said.

That topped the year's previous single-day high mark of Jan. 7, when 1.21 inches of rain were recorded at the airport.

200 evacuated in Sonora

Residents of three Sonoran communities were in a state of alert yesterday after river flooding caused evacuations and damage.

Heavy rains caused 200 families to flee homes on Monday, January 18, in Magdalena, Imuris and Santa Ana, about 50 miles south of Nogales, said Luis Alfonso Salcida, deputy director of Civil Protection in Hermosillo. No casualties were reported, he said.

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"The situation is calming down because the rains let up," Salcida said yesterday. "But there's still an alert situation because there's a forecast for rain."

The agency is still determining the number of residents left homeless by the flooding of the Rio Magdalena in the three areas, Salcida said.

While the flooding is a hardship, the communities are not overwhelmed by the situation, Salcida said. "Everything is under control. The problems have not exceeded their capacity to respond to them."

State disaster declared

Floodwaters chased hundreds of Southern Arizonans from their homes yesterday as President Bush declared the state a disaster area.

The federal assistance will come in as the rains move out, since the forecast calls for the first extended period of dryness following 14 straight days of rain statewide.

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Preliminary damage estimates stand between \$56 million and \$59 million statewide. That includes \$24 million in damage to public facilities, \$18 million in damage to Indian property, and \$5.5 million in damage to residences.

January 21, 1993: Record flow from Coolidge Dam threatens to shut I-10

Record water discharges from the Coolidge Dam, caused by two weeks of rain in the state, threatened to close Interstate 10 at the Gila River crossing between Tucson and Phoenix yesterday.

Meanwhile, those in flooded areas in and around Tucson gained limited access to the rest of the city. The Catalina Highway also remained closed yesterday because of a rock slide Tuesday night near the base of the Santa Catalina Mountains.

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