Feb. 1996 Columbia Basin Flood Photos

SATURDAY

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MOSTLY SUNNY
High 50, Low 30

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The Flood of '96

Rampaging rivers

Dayton fights to save town

By RICK LARSON and KIM BRADFORD
Herald staff writers

DAYTON — It looked like the battle to save the west half of town was lost.

About 7:30 a.m. Friday, the raging Touchet River was slopping over the Main Street bridge. Logs, sheds, a 350-gallon fuel tank and even a small cabin careened against the bridge, tearing out one of two city water mains running underneath.

After three days of fighting the flooding Touchet and Patit Creek, the men, women and teen-agers were dropping from exhaustion.

Cries kept popping up along the dike that yet another spot was leaking and needed more sandbags.

Then they ran out of sandbags.

Some 30,000 bags already had been used, and there simply were no more. There was nothing to do but evacuate the 350 homes in the west half of town before the bridge went out or the dike breached.

School buses went door to door and, within 30 minutes, had picked up everyone. There was nothing left that could be done.

Then the sun came out, and the temperature dropped. No more rain, no more melting snow, for now.

And Chuck Reeves, a Columbia County commissioner who was helping toss sandbags at the Main Street bridge, watched the water start to drop. His veterinary clinic, hard against the dike just west of the bridge, already was swamped from seepage.

By 11 a.m., Reeves could drink a cup of coffee and see where the water had dropped about 2 feet. The river had topped the dike that

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Herald photos/Bob Brawdy

Onlookers stand Friday near a washed-out bridge across the north fork of the Touchet River, just outside of the Dayton city limits. The bridge is just off the road leading to Ski Bluewood.

Mid-Columbians flee cresting Yakima River

By DON McMANMAN and WILL SWARTS
Herald staff writers

Today, a near record flood will course through the lower reaches of the Yakima River, swirling through low-lying homes and keeping roads and bridges closed.

Officials said the river would reach a crest of 20.5 feet around 10 a.m. today, based on news that Parker Dam upstream recorded its crest at 6:30 p.m. Friday. The crest figure is based on a measuring gauge in Benton City that sets the Yakima's flood stage at 13 feet.

Benton County Emergency Management officials said the water would stay at its peak for about 10 hours before beginning to drop.

The 20.5 foot forecast would be the second highest Yakima River flood ever recorded. The greatest crest was 21.5 feet in 1933.

No injuries were reported as of 7:30 p.m. Friday, although Columbia Basin Dive Rescue teams were dispatched to Columbia Park in Kennewick to retrieve three cattle carcasses that apparently floated into the Columbia River from the Yakima.

Evacuations continued through Friday night as the flood crest rose above levels recorded in December, sluicing swift brown water through low-lying areas of Benton City, West Richland and Richland.

Temperatures cooled rapidly Friday night, dipping below freezing by 9 p.m. after highs reached the mid-60s.

Friday afternoon, firefighters from Benton County District 2 spread across about a quarter of Benton City, pounding on doors and telling residents to evacuate.

Emergency crews planned to stand watch throughout the night, ready to give one final warning to those who chose to ignore the first warning, said Fire Chief Ron Duncan.

Duncan said about 300 homes in the southeast section of the city received evacuation notices late Friday afternoon.

Latest flood news

The Yakima River had risen above 18 feet at 12:30 a.m. today and was rising about 6 inches an hour, officials said.

A team of federal emergency officials from Washington, D.C., plan a tour this weekend of Pacific Northwest flooded areas. They tour western Oregon today, with a helicopter tour of flood-damaged Waitsburg on Sunday morning.

For updates on the Yakima River and related flood information from Benton County Emergency Management, call the Tri-City Herald's inTouch service. The free call is 736-7600, ext. 2877.

"Whether they evacuate or not is up to them," Duncan said.

Notices went to those living on the 100-year flood plain, an area that would be inundated only by a flood so powerful it would appear, on average, only once a century.

"There were a few people who were new to the area and didn't have any previous experience," said Donna Sowers, a volunteer with Emergency Management. "I think the notices were pretty useful."

As flood waters Friday climbed over the banks of the Yakima, Benton City became partially isolated. The bridge over the river to Interstate 82 was closed at 12:30 p.m., leaving only two routes out: the Old Inland Empire Highway to Prosser and Horn Road to the Vantage Highway.

The flood's power attracted rubberneckers throughout the day as they streamed down to the river, watching it grow from a stream perhaps 60 yards across to a torrent that spanned a quarter mile at points.

People in 47 homes in Benton City and West

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Two pickups make their way down the flooded Buckskin Loop, just off Van Giesen Street

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