

After the floodwater retreated



(Courtesy photos, John Zeiger and Civil Air Patrol) Medicine Bow was surrounded by floodwaters as seen from the air in this June 15 scene.

Lessons from Carbon County's 2010 flooding

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John Zeiger thought Saratoga had 40,000-50,000 sandbags in reserve before the North Platte River rose the first weekend in June.

He also thought the Carbon County Road and Bridge Department had another 10,000.

Neither assertion proved correct.

After the river surpassed the 8.5-foot flood stage in Saratoga on June 6, Zeiger — Carbon County Emergency Management coordinator and Saratoga mayor — discovered the method employed to calculate bags-

per-bundle was incorrect, effectively doubling the count.

"There were obviously some communication issues," Zeiger said, adding, "Thank God it didn't flood any quicker than it did."

A similar shortage faced other Carbon County towns along the North Platte and its tributaries. Several municipalities didn't have enough sandbags on hand to mitigate the record flooding that characterized the second and third weeks of June.

"You think you're ready for something, and you find out you're not really ready at all," said Kenda Colman, Medicine Bow town councilor and town Emergency Management Coordinator. "I think people were shocked with just how much water there was."

Sandbagging shores

Elk Mountain and Medicine Bow had 1,500 and 1,000 sandbags on hand, respectively, before the Medicine Bow River began flooding. More were needed at both locations, as well as at Sinclair and Fort Steele, north of Saratoga along the North Platte River.

Zeiger contacted the Cheyenne Homeland Security office about picking up additional sandbags on June 9, but there was a timing issue.

"Fremont County got hit with flooding first. Homeland Security had sent its stock to Fremont and had to order another shipment," Zeiger said. "We had to wait (about half a day extra) to get the bags."

The sandbags made it to Carbon County before the highest flood levels occurred between June 13 and 15. The National Weather Service reports the highest crests on the North Platte River were just over 10 feet on June 13 in Saratoga and 11.6 feet — 2.5 feet above the flood level — near Sinclair and Fort Steele. Data could not be provided for the Medicine Bow River at Elk Mountain and Medicine Bow.

"We definitely need to have more sandbags on hand so we can deal with situations like this," Zeiger said. "And we need to do better at communicating on several levels."

By June 17, most of the floodwaters receded. At last count, this left 2,000-3,000 sandbags deployed in Elk Mountain, about 12,000 in Medicine Bow, 50,000-60,000 in Saratoga and nearly 5,000 in Sinclair and Fort Steele.

Flooding aftermath

Although property damage within town limits appeared minimal, officials in effected towns delineated site-specific changes they'd like to enact.

"We need to get a new fire whistle for the town's alert system," Zeiger said of Saratoga. "We had to ring 20 times for volunteers because we couldn't get the siren to work the way we wanted it to."

Although the Saratoga Volunteer Fire Dept.'s whistle is tested daily, blasts of variable lengths could not be produced during the flooding.

In Medicine Bow, the flood exposed the town's dependence on its sewer lift.

"We didn't realize how vulnerable it was ... and if we'd have lost it, we'd have lost the town's drinking water," said Karen Heath, Medicine Bow town clerk. "Fortunately it was saved."

In order to remedy the situation, Heath said the town is applying for a grant from the National Resource Conservation Service to partially fund a \$4,500 dike around the lift.

Other areas need further reinforcement, she added.

Elk Mountain Mayor Rick Christopherson said vulnerable riverbanks need rebuilt and further reinforcement.

"Landowners are going to have to step up and do their part to strengthen the riverbank along their parts." Christopherson said. "Because as far as actually changing the flow of the river, you can't do that."

Elk Mountain, Medicine Bow and Saratoga have increased their sandbag reserves to around 10,000.

Planning

Although planning for disasters is important, Christopherson said it poses a significant challenge.

"It's really hard to prepare for something like that," he said. "You can have things pretty much laid out, but until you're in that situation, it's really hard to come up with a plan ... to control everything that's going to happen."

Colman said agreements could be of aid in such situations.

"I thinking we're going to see some agreements drawn up between towns, so we can more or less function and do what we did this time," she said. "When people respond to an emergency they're wonderful ... but it can be difficult to keep track of everyone, where they came from and what they're doing."

Zeiger said most towns' emergency plans are fairly informal, but in light of the June 2010 flooding, revisions were likely across the board.

"I'll obviously try and encourage (officials) to take another look, but I don't think most municipalities will need too much encouragement," he said, adding, "I think we all just got too complacent. This one caught us off guard and nipped us in the bud, but it could have been a lot worse."