

Flooding swamps Walhalla area in Oconee County, delays school buses

By Titus Ledbetter III (Contact), Ken Ruinard, John Staed
Sunday, September 20, 2009

OCONEE COUNTY — Flooding in the Walhalla area Saturday and Sunday caused the closure of about 30 roads, but no injuries, said Oconee County Emergency Management Director Rodney Burdette.

Heavy rainfall put most creeks and tributaries over their banks, he said, and caused emergency workers, road crews, the Sheriff's Office and others to survey roads and check on residents all day Sunday.

The mess caused the Oconee County Board of Education to decide to run school buses on a two-hour delay Monday morning. Schools will open at the regular time, but late students will be excused, said Kay Powell, a school district spokeswoman.

Burdette said the rainfall was the worst in several years.

"This is the worst flooding we've had since Hurricane Ivan came through in 2004," he said.

National Weather Service Meteorologist Bob Bruce said 8.43 inches of rain fell in the Walhalla area in a 24-hour period ending at 3 p.m. Sunday.

In two locations, people were assisted from their homes, Burdette said, but did not remember the specific locations.

"We got them with other family members," he said.

Oconee County Emergency Management issued a voluntary evacuation order for residents of Cooper Road near the Georgia border of Oconee County, S.C. due to rising waters in that roadway.

In all, 33 roads were closed within the county Sunday but only 10 roads were closed as of 9:30 p.m., said Eric Lutz, the operations chief for Oconee County Emergency Services.

An emergency shelter opened at the Westminster Baptist Church in Westminster for residents who were unable to relocate with family or friends, Lutz said. Officials were in the process of closing the shelter at 9:30 p.m. because nobody used it, he said.

Oconee County officials said South Boundary Street, Torrington Road, Vine Street and Laurel Street in Walhalla and U.S. 11 at Hodge Road were flooded. Several boat docks were swept away from homes on Lake Keowee and Lake Jocassee.

Photo Gallery

FLOODING IN OCONEE COUNTY WORST IN YEARS

Several days of rain has residents in Oconee County looking at closed roads and flooding areas. Emergency workers in Westminster closed Cooper Road near the Tugaloo River near the Georgia state line while observers keep an eye on the rising water at Praters Bridge on the state line. A power plant with the Yonah Dam is a sight for Stephens County residents and nearby Oconee County residents watching water gush over the top, a rare sight by local accounts.



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Lt. Travis Tilson of the Oconee County Sheriff's Office said a small dam broke on Dynamite Road that closed U.S. 11 in that vicinity.

The heaviest rain was from Walhalla north and west, Burdette said. Trees were down and some residents lost power, but it was quickly restored, he said. The flooded areas were "from Walhalla north through Salem, Mountain Rest, back toward Long Creek and (U.S.) 29 towards Seneca and the Bountyland area," he said.

Asked what rivers or creeks were affected, Burdette said, "They are all pretty much out of their banks."

Jessica Roach with the American Red Cross in Walhalla said a group of about 45 youths from the Cherokee Boys Camp in Oconee County were planning to come to the shelter, but could not get out of their location.

At the Yonah Dam in Stephens County, Westminster resident Devin Merritt said the water was as high as he'd seen it in years.

"The last time the water was this high, it was in the eighties," he said.

Jenny Arwood, an assistant night shift supervisor for Anderson County Emergency Services, said Sunday night that she was not aware of any weather-related issues in Anderson County.

Area residents can expect some relief, but not until Tuesday, when the rain will taper off, Bruce said.

A low pressure area is pulling moisture from the Gulf and from the Atlantic into the area, he said.

"Basically everything's coming together," Bruce said.

The system Saturday delayed the Clemson football game twice, to push it to nearly five hours in length. But the rain depended on the location: At the Anderson Regional Airport, 0.88 inches of rain was reported in the 24 hour period ending at 3 p.m. Sunday, Bruce said.

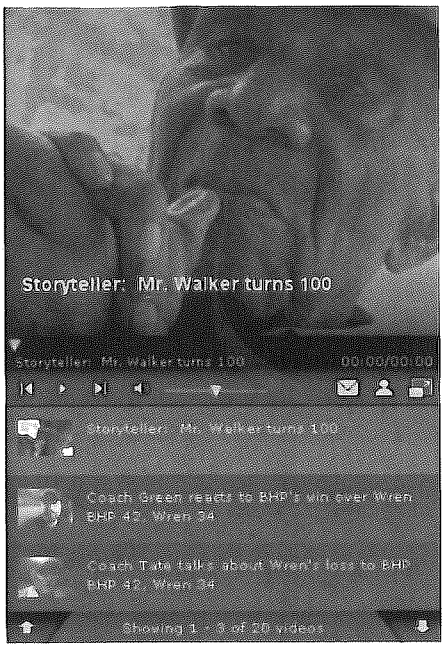
Lake Jocassee got 3.49 inches, but Clemson reported only 0.52 inches in the 24-hour period, he said. For the month, Anderson has received 2.43 inches of rain, just 0.29 off the monthly average. But for the year, Greenville, the nearly yearly reporting location, showed 29.19 inches of rain, 8.12 inches below normal, he said.

Still, "it'll change tonight (Sunday)," he said.

Hartwell Lake, which recently was lower than normal because of lack of rain, was at 654.38 feet, according to the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Web site Sunday night. Full pool is 660 feet.

While residents will get a break in the rain in the middle of the week, another system is expected to move into the area by the weekend, Bruce said.

WSPA News Channel 7 also contributed to this story.



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