Oconee flood among worst recorded

Damage assessment to follow in upcoming days



Jessica Nelms/Staff

SC Department of Transportation crews remove logs and other debris that heavy rains washed against the bridge on Welcome Church Road in Westminster.

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WALHALLA – Oconee County was under a flood watch Monday night as several roads remained closed and residences near the South Carolina/Georgia border were evacuated. Emergency Services Director Rodney Burdette was waiting and hoping that the worst is over after the heaviest rains that flooded much of Oconee County over the weekend turned into intermittent, moderate showers Monday.

"Right now we're waiting to see what the next front is going to do," Burdette said of an approaching system that is expected to bring more rain over the next three days.

"Once we get past that, we'll try to get around the hardest-hit areas and do a damage assessment."

At the western extremity of Oconee County, a the Cooper Road community along the Tugaloo River at the Georgia/South Carolina border was under a voluntary evacuation Monday, affecting 16 homes there. Burdette said efforts to keep dams along the Tugaloo from overflowing led to a chain reaction of rising waters behind them, causing flooding. There are no reported injuries.

Officials at the National Weather Service in Greenville confirmed Monday that the 11.88 inches of rain Walhalla received from Saturday morning to Monday night was the third highest total ever recorded there, and the most since 1924. The most recorded rain seen at the heart of Oconee County in a three-day period came in 1905, when more than 13 inches drenched Walhalla.

Burdette said the flooding was the worst he's seen since 2004, when the remnants of Hurricane Ivan blasted the county.

"It's hard to compare the two," Burdette said. "We probably had more rain in a longer period of time in this storm. When Ivan came through, we were affected in a 12-hour period with torrential rain. And with Ivan, we had high wind and more downed trees.

"But now, the ground's been saturated, and the water has nowhere to go, and it just runs off into the low-lying areas."

Most of the rivers and streams in the area, which had been above their banks late Sunday, receded slightly Monday, although some roads in northwestern Oconee County were still closed. As of Monday evening, road closures included: Land Bridge Road in Mountain Rest, Alexander Road, Busch Creek Road in Walhalla, Camp Road near Westminster, North Horseshoe Bridge road in Westminster, Whitewater Lake road in Salem, Lester Lane in Tamassee, George Todd Road in Tamassee, McGee Road and Coneross Farm Road near Walhalla. The weather and road closures affected the schedules of district school buses.

Oconee County District Superintendent Mike Lucas said buses operated on a two-hour delay Monday.

"This will allow for greater visibility to ensure safe transit for our students who board buses before dawn. Buses are much heavier, and it is critical that teachers be able to visibly access safety and road conditions given the rainfall we had," Lucas said. "School and district staff were asked to report at their regular reporting time unless they are unable to travel due to road conditions and employees delayed should contact their supervisor."

Oconee officials said Monday night that no school delays had been announced for Tuesday, and that such an announcement would come no later than 6 a.m. Tuesday.

Students who arrived by car or other means on Monday were able to attend school at the regular time and any later arrivals by car or bus in the two hour window received an excused tardy if related to weather or flooding conditions.

On Monday, John Tomko of the National Weather Service said more rain is on the way,

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but added that the precipitation the rest of the week wouldn't be comparable to the weekend's storm.

"Things will decrease late Monday tonight. There will still be precipitation in the area, but we're talking about a tenth of an inch Tuesday, and even less on Wednesday. The amounts we're talking about are pretty light," Tomko said.

A front moving through this weekend will be the first real opportunity for drier conditions to hit the area, Tomko said, and that will not come until late Sunday at the earliest. Recent rains have raised Lake Jocassee from 81 feet of full pool on Sept. 14 to 86 feet today, while strict regulation of Lake Keowee's waters have kept it a steady 96 feet.

Burdette said he and the rest of the Emergency Services Department were keeping a close eye on weather models, hoping for a reprieve from the constant rainfall.

"Right now we're in a holding pattern to see how much more rain will come in," he said.

A TALE OF TWO COUNTIES

Officials in Pickens County are reporting they've seen nothing relatively close to the historic flooding in Oconee County.

Billy Birdwell of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers said the storm had dropped roughly four inches of rain on Lake Hartwell in the last 24 hours, which while considered a substantial weather event, is significantly less than what was seen in farther west. Hartwell has risen roughly 1.5 feet due to the storm, and is likely to rise even more and force the Corps to act to maintain reservoir balance in the Savannah River Basin.

"Rain events usually take a little bit to complete themselves. In other words, runoff will continue for a while after a major rain event," Birdwell said. "After something like this, it affects the reservoir level, and we try to keep Hartwell and Lake Thurmond in balance with each other because they're about the same number of feet below guide curve. What we'll likely end up doing in the next couple of days is pull more water out of Hartwell to balance Thurmond."

While Sertoma Field in Walhalla was completely under water Sunday and Monday, Clemson has seen no such flooding, City of Clemson Parks and Recreation Director Steve Figueroa said.

Lynn Fisher, Pickens County's emergency preparedness director said the rains have been manageable.

"We received anywhere from three to six inches of rain that the ground was able to handle depending upon where it fell or periodic breaks in the storm," Fisher said.

There were some patches of power outages in Pickens County, and several trees down in Ridgecrest near Greenville County, and some unconfirmed reports of downed trees in Eastatoe Valley, Fisher added.

"Other than there being a lot of standing water in the roads, God has blessed us with this," he said. "We've seen a spate of accidents, especially with the Clemson home game taking place, but, generally speaking, it's been quiet."

David Conner, public works director for the City of Clemson, said the area had "dodged a bullet."

"It rained steady, but there were no flooding issues or anything close to the creeks coming from the banks. We had rain that helped our soil and the lakes," Conner said.



Jessica Nelms/Staff

Recent flooding dumped 11.88 inches in northern Oconee County, turning the normally calm waters beneath the Bumgardner Bridge in Tamassee into a raging torrent. The flood displaced some residents near the Georgia border. Damage assessments are under way. Lake Hartwell has risen roughly 1.5 feet due to the storm, and is likely to rise even more.



Jessica Nelms/Staff

From left: Bobby Pelfrey, Andy Lusk, and Christina and Corey Wood stare in awe at the rising waters from the Burnt Tanyard Bridge.



Jessica Nelms/Staff

Cooper Road in Westminster was just one of many roads closed due to flooding throughout the area.