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Special report: Coast thrashed by winds, rain

Flooding forces evacuations; power outages widespread

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A late-season coastal storm battered Delaware with heavy winds and torrential rains, forcing evacuations along Delaware Bay in Kent County and knocking out power to tens of thousands. Several longtime residents described the flooding as among the worst they'd ever seen.

Bret Scott, a spokesman for Kent County government, said at least 150 residents were removed from their homes in Kitts Hummock and Pickering Beach in coastal Kent County, where a mandatory evacuation order was issued early Monday. By midafternoon, about 40 people had taken refuge in an emergency shelter at the Little Creek Fire Hall, said Kathleen M. Aviles, director of volunteer services and communications.

"The National Guard is plucking people from their attics and their flooded homes from nearby communities," she said.

Delmarva Power reported early Monday evening 20,000 of its Delaware customers -- down from 29,000 earlier in the day -- were without power. Spokeswoman Bridget Shelton said that number was expected to rise significantly as calls came in from customers getting home from work "to find that their lights are not coming on for them."

As of 10 p.m., the number was down to 6,879.

The high winds, heavy rain and large numbers of outages could keep some individual customers without power until midday today or beyond, said Delmarva Power spokesman Matt Likovich.

"In a lot of cases," he said, "it takes just as much work to restore one customer as it takes to restore a lot of customers."

Delaware Electric Cooperative and the city of Dover's electric department reported outages, but most service was restored by noon Monday.

In Georgetown, winds gusting up to 50 mph and flooding prompted Wilmington University to postpone a commencement ceremony for 215 students set for Monday night. Heather O'Connell, vice president of enrollment management, said the ceremony was reset for 6 p.m. Wednesday.

School districts with students who live along the Delaware Bay coast sent students home early and canceled afternoon activities. The stretch of Del. 1 between Dewey Beach and Fred Hudson Road (Sussex 360) -- including the Indian River Inlet Bridge -- was closed Monday afternoon because of high water. The Department of Transportation said it was still closed Monday evening.

Most roads in Kent County's coastal area remained closed late Monday afternoon because of flooding. In Milford, the Mispillion River overflowed its banks early Monday morning, with water covering several downtown streets. But the water was receding by late afternoon and Lt. Edward Huey said officers expected to reopen Northeast Front and Church streets later in the day.

Two other Milford streets, Park Avenue and Washington Street, were washed out, Huey said, and would remain closed.

Bay beaches bore brunt

In Kent County, officials and residents marveled at the magnitude of the flooding, which many chalked up as the worst in decades.

Anthony Pratt, the state's shoreline and waterway manager, said the storm system was unusual in several ways. For one thing, all the big problems were at the Delaware Bay beaches rather than the ocean beaches, where the waves fell short of the protective sand dunes.

"The reason why the ocean coast has fared so well is because of beach renourishment," Pratt said.

For another thing, the storm came late in the season. "This is the kind of thing we see in March, not in May," he said.

For a while Monday, Pratt and his staff focused on the direction of the wind as high tides approached. If the wind had continued to come from the east, it would cause more problems along Delaware's coast.

But by midafternoon, winds shifted to the north, and the high tide passed without significant additional flooding.

Pratt said the storm, with its strong east winds, caused extensive flooding for Delaware Bay communities because waves were close together and the storm was slow-moving.

Sand, high water problematic

As the morning progressed and the water receded, road crews were faced with another problem -- blowing sand.

Just north of Indian River Inlet, a snowplow worked to clear the sand from the road.

Pratt said coastal residents have been lucky for the last two winters. Although there was cumulative beach erosion from small coastal storms, this is the first dramatic storm to hit the Delaware coast in several years.

He said this was probably the worst coastal storm residents have seen since back-to-back nor'easters in January and February of 1998.

"We've been extremely lucky," he said.

The storm caused some anxious moments Monday morning for Lenny Jackson, a lifelong resident of Bowers Beach. He turned his attention to the rising water after helping other residents move their cars from low-lying areas.

"It's not settling down," he said then. "We still have real strong winds, and the tide's coming in. The tide still hasn't even gone all the way down, and now it's coming back in. If it gets to the house, I'm going to go."

Jackson described the flooding as "the worst I've ever seen. There wasn't any warning. The tide came in really fast."

Jim Parker, co-owner of JP's Wharf in Bowers Beach, said the storm rivaled any he had seen since the 1970s. "The water was halfway up the door across the street here," he said, pointing to the badly damaged Bayside Inn.

"You can see the water line inside my truck. I'm going to be calling the insurance company a little later to tell them I need a new one."

Near Little Creek, Lena Archer stood in calf-deep water across her front yard along Del. 9 and counted herself lucky.

"It got up the steps to the door, but it didn't get inside," Archer said. "All we lost were some things in the garage. I've got three dogs in there, so I'm not going anywhere."

Floods moved quickly

Like Jackson, Archer said residents got little warning about the approaching flood hazard.

"You couldn't tell from the reports what it was going to do," she said.

A short while later, Jeff Howell of the state Division of Fish and Wildlife drove a pickup truck with a state-owned air boat in tow slowly across a washed-over bridge on Little Creek's south side.

"We had about 80 people pulled out by boat so far this morning," Howell said as he headed for flooded communities in the south.

"Some of them are staying at the Little Creek Fire Hall, but you can't get to it from this side of town. You have to go around [through Dover] and come in from the north side."

Al Metheny, Kent County's emergency management chief, said some of his people in the field had described the coastal flooding as on par with that produced by "the flooding storm of '62," which generally is considered to be one of the worst ever.

A mandatory evacuation order remained in effect late Monday for the Kitts Hummock and Pickering Beach communities, and Metheny said the Little Creek shelter would remain open overnight for those not able to return to their homes.

At Bowers Beach, high tide was marked early Monday morning at 8.5 feet, or 2 feet above the "critical" level tracked by the U.S. Geological Survey. Tides at Lewes and Delaware City were as much as 4 feet above normal.

Lee Robertson, a meteorologist with the National Weather Service, blamed the storm on the convergence of two low-pressure systems, including one that developed just south of Delmarva. By midafternoon Monday, he said, the storm was moving out to sea and the wind and rain were receding in Delaware.

At the Little Creek emergency shelter, Charlie Wu, a retired chemist, said he was able to watch the floodwaters engulf Pickering Beach from the cupola of his home on Sandpiper Drive. The water came from Delaware Bay to the east and the marshes of the Little Creek Wildlife Preserve to the west, he said.

"Around midnight or so, we began to see the water pounding the sand dunes," he said. "I've never seen water that high. The dune is now washed away."

Wu's neighbor, Charlie Hinkle, maintains a cottage on seven-foot pilings across Sandpiper Drive.

"I was tossing and turning all night," he said. "Every time I'd hear the winds blow, you could feel the house move."

"I got up this morning to 4 feet of water under the house. I had no intention of leaving, but they shut the power off."
