

FRIDAY

OCTOBER 17, 2003

■ Rain spawned by a storm system pushes the Skagit River near the top of its banks

■ Evacuations begin in low-lying areas of the Skagit River basin near Concrete, Hamilton

■ Winds reach 79 mph, knocking out power to thousands of area homes and businesses

October howler

Wind roars, river rises, power fails

Skagit Valley Herald staff

The Skagit River rose to within a foot of the top of its dikes today in the aftermath of a fierce storm that lashed the northern Puget Sound region with winds up to 79 mph, causing widespread power outages, damage from falling trees and the evacuation of some eastern Skagit County communities.

Residents of low-lying areas of Hamilton, Concrete and Marblemount were ordered by the Skagit County Department of Emergency Management to evacuate their homes this morning. Shelters were being provided for the evacuees at Community Hall, in Marblemount, Grassmere Fire Station, in Concrete and at the Hamilton Baptist Church, which was still waiting for power to be restored as of 9:30 this morning.

In Sedro-Woolley, Clear Lake and Lyman elementary schools were closed, and in Concrete, all classes were starting two hours late.

On the north side of the Skagit River, a logjam was forming around both the new and old bridges connecting Mount Vernon and Burlington, said Charles Bennett, secretary of Dike District 12, which maintains the dikes on Burlington's side of the river.

Construction crews on the Riverside Bridge were keeping an eye on the logjam that had formed close to the Burlington side, but so far the water level wasn't interfering with their work.

By this morning, the flood-fighting effort had begun, with workers patrolling the dikes, guarding against breaks. A boat from the Burlington Northern-Santa Fe Railroad was expected to help remove some of the logs, and cement blocks and sandbags were being deployed.

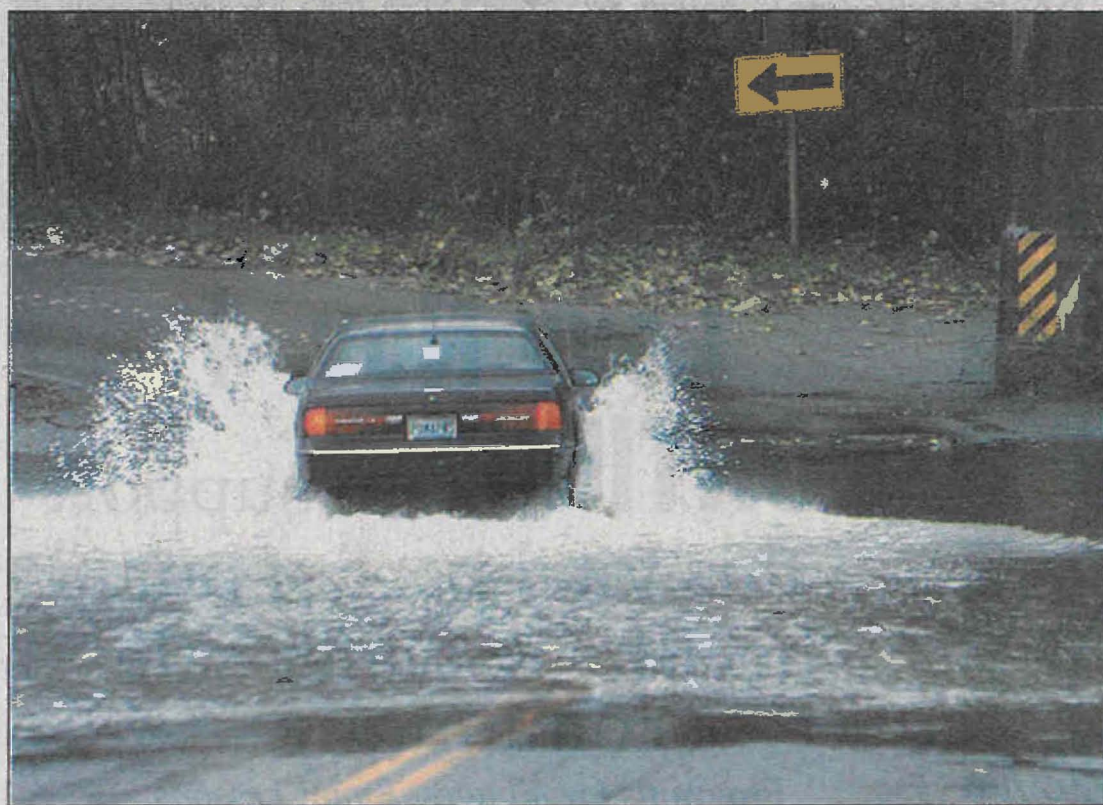
The dikes range in elevation

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Scott Terrell / Skagit Valley Herald

Stan Wing (left) and Russ Snell look over a large oak tree that blew over Thursday in the Sedro-Woolley branch of the Bank of America parking lot. The tree crushed four cars, including a 1992 Oldsmobile 88 owned by Wing's wife, Missy Wing.



Scott Terrell / Skagit Valley Herald

A car plows through rising water over Whitmarsh Road at the Burlington Northern Santa Fe railroad trestle today in Burlington.

Red Cross opening emergency shelters

Skagit Valley Herald staff

Emergency shelters sponsored by the Skagit Valley chapter of the American Red Cross are open at Marblemount Community Club at 60055 Highway 20 in Marblemount and Grassmere Fire Station at Concrete.

More sites may be opened later today, depending on demand.

Volunteers interested in helping out at the shelters can receive quick training in shelter staffing at the local American Red Cross office, 119 S. 14th St., Mount Vernon.

To volunteer, or to get information about shelter sites, call the office at 350-424-5291.

Storm: County is fully mobilized

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from 44 feet near the Nookachamps Basin to 38 feet near Anacortes' water treatment plant, he said.

Ric Boge, of the Skagit County Public Works Department, said the river was expected to crest at 33 feet at Mount Vernon by 10 a.m. Saturday. Flood stage is 28 feet.

The county is fully mobilized, he said, with efforts concentrated in the eastern part of the county, where the flooding was worst this morning. Crews were posting road closure signs at various points in the eastern county.

Puget Sound Energy's two dams on the Baker River above Concrete were holding back water, but still letting through about 4,000 cubic feet per second, said Bob Barnes, a hydrologist for the company. The U.S. Corps of Engineers will decide whether to reduce the releases even further, he said.

The Skagit River was at 30 feet in Concrete by 9:30 a.m. and was expected to crest at 34 feet by 10 p.m., five feet higher than Thursday afternoon, said Tom Sheahan, director of the Emergency Management Department in Skagit County.

Another storm is expected to

follow, but it's undetermined if it will hit the Skagit County basin this afternoon or evening. Meanwhile, rain is expected to continue throughout the day.

About 3,000 people remained without power this morning, said Tim Bader, a spokesman for Puget Sound Energy. Two-thirds of those outages are in Skagit County, Bader added.

At the peak of the outages Thursday, about 30,000 homes and businesses in Kitsap, Island, Skagit and Whatcom counties were left in the dark, he said. Most of those outages were caused by trees falling on power lines, he said.

"Luckily, we've been able to restore power quickly to most of our customers," he said.

About 35 county public works employees worked through the night to remove fallen trees. They were equipped with chain saws to cut and remove small trees as well as snowplows to push large trees off roadways until they could be removed.

The storm caused a number of rock slides along Highway 20, which is closed between mile posts 100 and 170. In some areas water is over the roadway because rocks have plugged up drains, said Dustin Terpening, public information officer with

the Washington State Department of Transportation.

Winds also knocked down power lines north of Sedro-Woolley, causing the closure of Highway 9 in both directions between Kalloch and Mosier roads about 1 p.m. on Thursday. The road reopened about two and a half hours later.

In Sedro-Woolley, an oak tree fell about 2:15 p.m. Thursday in the parking lot of Bank of America. The tree damaged about a half dozen cars owned by bank employees.

"The wind knocked it flat across the cars," said manager Sharon Prouty, who was at lunch when the incident happened.

Local restaurants — those with power at least — were packed with hungry customers who couldn't cook dinner at home.

At Denny's restaurant in Mount Vernon, a harried crew of cooks, waitresses and busboys served 500 customers on a night when only about 100 were expected. As the waiting list of hopeful diners grew longer and longer, managers called every staffer they could reach to come in and help.

"Between 5 and 9, we were slammed," said Denny's manager Steve Schneider. "It was just incredible."