

Skagit Valley Herald

Post-flood cleanup can be hazardous to health

By KASIA PIERZGA Staff Writer

Volunteers help tackle the mess

HAMILTON -- Dozens of volunteers pitched in this weekend to help clean up water-damaged homes, donning protective gear such as rubber boots, heavy-duty gloves and paper face masks to protect against illness caused by floodwater contamination.

At the flood-stricken home of Larry and Michele Houser, volunteer Alana Nelson helped remove several large aquariums that had housed an assortment of lizards, turtles, frogs and fish. While most of the animals made it through the disaster OK, the tropical fish didn't stand a chance of surviving the cold waters of the Skagit River.



Tim Nelson, a volunteer from Vineyard Community Church in Mount Vernon, removes a live fish from a damaged aquarium at Larry Houser's home in Hamilton Saturday. In the background is Nelson's wife, Alana Nelson.

Frank Varga / Skagit Valley Herald

Removing the stinky tankful of dead fish was a pretty unpleasant task, Nelson said.

"That one fish tank almost made me lose my breakfast," she said, squinching up her face in disgust.

Taking precautions against flood-borne disease caused by decaying carcasses and other filth is critical as local residents dig out from under the layer of mud and silt left behind by last month's flood, said Skagit County Health Department Director Peter Browning.

Murky brown water wasn't the only thing that washed through homes and property during the flood. The river also carried with it the contents of flooded sewage and septic systems, dead fish and farm animals, manure from flooded pasture, rotting food, spilled fuel and assorted garbage -- anything and everything else imaginable. Much of that mud has begun to dry out. As a truck wheeled through the town's silt-covered streets Saturday morning, it kicked up a cruddy cloud of dust in its wake -- dust that Browning said can be dangerous to your health.

"People forget that stuff is just dry sewage," Browning said. "You don't want to be breathing that stuff. And people should be using gloves sensibly and washing their hands frequently."

As volunteers checked in for the day at the Hamilton Fire Department, Red Cross staff and volunteers outfitted them with cleanup kits and advised them on how to go about their work without putting their health at risk. Among the items in the kits were bottles of bleach they could use to disinfect areas that had been contaminated by dirty floodwater.

The list of dangerous health risks associated with filthy floodwater is long, Browning said. But many people overlook the most common problem -- mold.

Failing to remove wet, contaminated materials and reduce moisture and humidity in a flood-damaged home can present serious long-term health risks, he said. Standing water and wet materials are a breeding ground for microorganisms such as viruses, bacteria and mold. They can cause disease, trigger allergic reactions and continue to damage materials long after the flood. The best thing to do is to get rid of anything that could harbor dangerous microorganisms, Browning said.

"People need to be aware of the potential toxicity of that stuff," he said.

In some areas, water sources also may have become contaminated, Browning said. The county health department is offering free well testing in affected areas through at least the end of this week.

By midmorning on Saturday, the Housers' home was filled with a team of 10 boot- and glove-clad volunteers that included members of the Vineyard Community Church in Mount Vernon. For hours, the pretty, white century-old structure was a whirl of motion as the crew removed the couple's belongings from the first floor.

Some items will be salvageable once they're carefully scrubbed clean. Others will just have to be stacked up and hauled away to a landfill.

Once the main floor is empty, a professional cleaning crew will steam clean and disinfect the floor, and the Housers' insurance company will likely pay to replace drywall and insulation damaged by four feet of turbid water.

Inside, a tired-looking Larry Houser surveyed the damaged home he bought just one year ago. While he knew the house was at risk of getting flooded, he had hoped it wouldn't happen before he could raise its foundation beyond of the reach of the Skagit.

"There's just a lot of things down here on the first floor that we couldn't get out in time," he said. "We had no idea the water was going to get up that high."

Alongside the streets of Hamilton, residents and volunteers filled huge garbage containers with beds and box springs, furniture, carpeting, insulation -- all the things that can never be safe to use again because of contamination. On a street corner in the center of town, ruined washers, dryers, refrigerators and freezers waited forlornly to be picked up by trash crews.

Back at his house, Houser was stoic about the huge cleanup job awaiting him.

"It's going to be a project for a while," he said. "We'll get through it somehow."

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