

Storm triggers mudflows, forces evacuations in Station Fire burn areas

Dan Abendschein and Alfred Lee, Los Angeles Newspaper Group, 1-19-10

LA CANADA FLINTRIDGE -- The first in a series of powerful Pacific storms pounded the region with rain Monday and unleashed mud and debris that prompted evacuations, flooded businesses, downed trees and power lines and set off hundreds of traffic crashes.

The El Niño-fueled system moved off Monday afternoon, leaving the area relatively unscathed and county and emergency officials breathing a collective sigh of relief. While officials ordered evacuations for 64 homes in the Paradise Valley neighborhood north of 5524 Ocean View Blvd. in La Cañada Flintridge, the orders were lifted at 5:30 p.m., after rains cleared.

Officials set up an evacuation center at La Cañada High School, but a power outage left the school without electricity. The center was closed at 7 p.m.

"All in all, everything worked well," said Bob Spencer, a spokesman for Los Angeles County Public Works, which cleared out a system of debris catch basins and installed concrete street barriers and sandbags to protect mudslide-threatened homes.

The barriers held up, despite more than 2 inches of rain falling on the foothills, he said.

"There were no injuries, apparently one home that suffered some property damage, a few stuck vehicles - that's not bad," Spencer said.

But Monday's storm was just a test for what could be an even more powerful storm expected to arrive overnight Wednesday, National Weather Service meteorologist Bill Hoffer said.

"So what do we have going on? In a word - everything," Hoffer said, noting the flooding, high wind and rough seas advisories the agency issued Monday.

Skies will be partly cloudy this morning, with the chance of rain increasing to 70 percent by tonight. Tonight's storm will be less intense than Monday's, but could add another inch to rainfall totals, the NWS said.

More than 3 inches of rain fell Monday at Mount Wilson, which is within the Station Fire burn area; 2.64 inches fell in Sierra Madre, where a minor mudslide was reported beneath the Santa Anita Fire burn area; and Morris Dam, where the Morris Fire originated, got 2.40 inches, the NWS reported.

Spencer said evacuation orders would "more than likely" be reinstated today, because the Mullally debris basin at the top of Ocean View Boulevard was at capacity.

"Because Mullally is full, if we get the predictions of rain tomorrow, and they're predicting anywhere from 1 to 2 inches, we will reinstate that evacuation order for tomorrow," he said.

One home on La Forest Drive suffered mud and debris damage, but the extent of the damage was not immediately known, Spencer said. Along Ocean View, the morning started out quiet, but things got intense as heavy rain increased.

An ever-growing stream of brown water ran down the street, rocketing trash cans out of the way. On side streets closest to burn areas, rocks and mud flooded yards and flowed onto the streets.

Some La Ca ada Flintridge residents worked diligently Monday trying to keep their yards from flooding. Gary Stibal and his neighbor, Mark Stanczak, shoveled mud out of a stream of water coming from the hills Monday morning.

"I think we're fighting a losing battle," Stanczak told his neighbor as they shoveled.

Stibal, whose home has been identified by the county as a high risk for debris flow impact, has already spent about \$55,000 to divert mud away from his home, he said.

He evacuated about 1:30 p.m. but returned only a couple hours later when the rain stopped. Mud poured into his backyard but was successfully diverted into the street.

In Altadena, an overflowing culvert sent debris and mud onto Canyon Crest Road, blocking off the road, said Los Angeles County Fire Inspector Matt Levesque. The debris trapped one vehicle, but no injuries were reported, he said.

Michael Donnelly, who lives on the 4100 block of Aralia Road, said he and hundreds of other nearby residents were stranded for several hours, unable to get up into or down from their homes once Canyon Crest was blocked off.

"It could be a good thing," he said of being stranded, with a laugh. "This is pretty exciting, to see nature doing its job."

The rains also triggered a mudslide 4 to 5 feet high in the 800 block of Skyland Drive in Sierra Madre, police Capt. Larry Giannone said. No property was damaged and no evacuations were ordered.

"If we can keep the flow going, I think we're going to be OK," Giannone said. "If the flow stops, that may be a different story."

Southern California Edison reported 44,560 customers without power throughout the region Monday, including 3,204 homes in La Ca ada Flintridge, 855 homes in San Gabriel and 554 homes in South Pasadena.

The California Highway Patrol reported 81 traffic collisions on county freeways and roads from 5 a.m. Monday to 9 a.m. No fatal crashes were reported, the agency said.

In Pasadena, two businesses - Team Pasadena auto body shop at 3003 E. Colorado Blvd. and Rose Garden Convalescent Center at 1899 N. Raymond Ave. - reported flooding, Fire Department spokeswoman Lisa Derderian said.

"We got hammered," said Dan Gaby, manager of Team Pasadena, when a berm behind the shop put in to divert water gave way, sending about 2 feet of water into the business.

The storm's strong winds, gusting to 40 mph, blew down an 80-year-old maple tree in front of David Silvas' Rosemead home. The tree knocked down part of the home's trim and fence but missed the main structure by a few feet.

Silvas' 85-year-old grandmother was inside the home when the tree fell. She was not injured.

"She is OK. She was shaking, because it fell right by where she was sitting," he said.

Another tree fell a few yards down from Silvas' home, on the 9500 block of Olney Street and onto a Chevrolet Cavalier.