

Coping with the deluge

Copyright © 2012, Los Angeles Times

The storm system that has pounded California since last week was expected to weaken today into a series of sporadic but intense showers, with the possibility of more rain Tuesday night.

Emergency preparedness officials, who had geared up for the worst in burn areas such as Malibu and Orange County, breathed a sigh of relief that the region's main problems were power outages, traffic accidents and downed utility lines. But with more rain expected today and possibly Tuesday, officials were not prepared to declare victory.

"We have very saturated hillsides, so we're keeping a watchful eye," said Carol Singleton, a spokeswoman for the Governor's Office of Emergency Services. "We don't know how much rainfall they can handle."

The fast-moving storm system that arrived Friday weakened the following day, then gained strength on Sunday, producing isolated downpours that dumped half an inch in a single hour in some locations. Today's forecast calls for a 30% chance of rain, with a 20% chance on Tuesday night, said Bill Hoffer, spokesman for the National Weather Service in Oxnard.

At least 5.29 inches of rain fell in the Los Angeles County mountains since Friday, 2.35 inches in Burbank, 1.62 inches in Anaheim, 1.8 inches in Van Nuys, 3.38 inches in Bel-Air, 6.5 inches in Sepulveda Pass near Mulholland Drive, 5.34 inches on Mt. Wilson, and 1.56 inches in downtown Los Angeles.

Rainfall in downtown Los Angeles reached 5.31 inches Sunday morning for the season (which began July 1), ahead of the norm of 4.23 inches and well above the 1.31 inches recorded at this time last year, said weather specialist Bonnie Bartling with the weather service in Oxnard.

The system came in three waves beginning last week, striking Northern California first and moving southward, causing dozens of flash floods and treacherous conditions for motorists, resulting in four deaths across the state.

"We're ready and have got everything ready to go: extra crews, staff, swift-water teams, dump trucks loaded with sand," said Al Jackson, a supervisor with the Los Angeles County Fire Department, while he was with crews Sunday. "But we're just waiting."

With snow falling Sunday night in the Tejon Pass, the California Highway Patrol slowed motorists on Interstate 5 to control the flow of traffic. In San Bernardino County, snow prompted the closure of schools today in the Rim of the World Unified School District, covering Crestline, Lake Arrowhead and Running Springs.

The storms left at least 311,512 homes and businesses without power on the Central Coast and Southern California at some point since Friday, said Mashi Nyssen, spokeswoman for Southern California Edison. By Sunday night, 330 homes -- mostly in the Bishop and Lake Arrowhead areas -- were still without power.

In Los Angeles, up to 42,000 customers lost service in the storms, said Department of Water and Power officials. Although most of the homes had power restored, an additional 5,800 lost electricity on Sunday night.

The worst damage was in Northern California, where at least 220,000 homes and businesses from Bakersfield to the northern California border were still without power Sunday afternoon, said Pacific Gas & Electric spokesman Jon Tremayne.

Since Friday "we had over 2 million customers impacted," Tremayne said. "We've replaced 530 poles and we've had to repair 500 miles of wire since Friday. Basically, our crews have built a new power line from San Francisco" to Southern California, he said.

In the Sierra foothills, workers were relying on snowshoes, all-terrain vehicles and helicopters as they repaired equipment in the most remote spots, utility officials said.

Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger declared three counties in Northern California in a state of emergency: Kings, Sacramento, and Glenn.

Burn areas in Southern California escaped serious problems.

Ravaged by a series of fires last fall, Malibu had braced for the worst. But the three days of rain passed largely without incident. "The roads are open, there are no power outages," said Los Angeles County Sheriff's Deputy Ismael Lua.

"We don't have any reports of rock slides. All we've managed is a few wet streets."

In Orange County, a small but powerful hail storm passed

through Modjeska Canyon, causing a mudslide that covered driveways and part of the road, said Orange County Fire Authority spokesman Mike Blawn.

County authorities shut down their emergency operations center and the Red Cross shelter in Villa Park was closed.

Voluntary evacuation orders remained in place for Modjeska, Williams and Harding canyons until the wet weather passes today, but an evacuation order for Silverado Canyon was lifted.

“As far as we know, there were no problems in those areas,” said Matt Johnson, an operator with the Orange County Fire Authority.

In San Bernardino County, officials also said the storms could have been worse.

“We haven’t had any problems so far. We’ve had some requests for sandbags, and we had some street flooding earlier, but today [Sunday] and yesterday [Saturday], the rain has not been that bad,” said Tom Barnes, dispatch supervisor for the San Bernardino County Sheriff’s Department.

By Sunday all freeways closed because of the weekend’s weather had reopened, said Jaime Coffee, a spokesman for the California Highway Patrol. The brunt of the storm, he said, was over.

“We have another storm predicted for Tuesday, but it’s not expected to be as severe,” Coffee said.

Near Lake Arrowhead, dozens of searchers Sunday failed to find hiker Dean Christy, 62, who had used a cellphone to report himself lost shortly after the storm hit Friday afternoon. The searchers were called in late Sunday because of blizzard conditions, but would resume early today, said San Bernardino County Sheriff’s Department spokeswoman Arden Wiltshire.

The lost man has a vacation home in the area, and was dressed warmly when he disappeared. He has not been heard from since early Saturday, when he reported an approximate location.

As snow poured over mountains across California and in bordering western states, skiing and snowboarding enthusiasts seized the chance to glide along some of the best fresh snow in years.

At Mammoth Mountain on Sunday, 2 feet of overnight snow created the perfect mound of fresh powder as thousands took to the slopes.

The 2 feet of snow brought the total snowfall at Mammoth Mountain to between 5 and 8 feet since storms began Friday, said Laura Johnson, communication manager at the 3,500-acre resort.

Johnson said real skiing and snowboarding addicts “live for days like today.”

The last time such a downpour occurred at Mammoth Mountain was two years ago, Johnson said, while strapping on her own boots to hit the snow.

“The ones that come out on blustery days and snow days are really the ones who are serious about it. This is what they live for,” Johnson said.

*By Ari B. Bloomekatz, John Spano and Christian Berthelsen
Los Angeles Times Staff Writers*