

“Over the first two or three weeks, it was a panic” to get the dikes built, and then praying they would hold. —Ray Roggow, emergency services director, Union County, S.D.

A flood of floods from page 3

Minnesota, two-thirds of all counties (193 in total) and 12 tribal reservations have been declared flood disaster areas this year, making governments in those counties and reservations eligible for federal assistance to help pay for flood-related damages and other costs.

As of September, 45 counties and five reservations in Montana and the Dakotas were also eligible for individual federal disaster assistance, which signifies much more extensive damage. The program offers up to \$30,200 in individual grant assistance to households and makes low-interest loans available to homeowners and businesses, but eligibility is much stricter than assistance for public infrastructure damage.

In Montana, 70 percent of the state, local and tribal jurisdictions declared emergencies in response to flooding. But even the counties that didn't declare local emergencies still reported some flooding, said Monique Lay, a spokesperson for the state Disaster and Emergency Services Division. “So, truly, the flooding was statewide.” She added that the state hasn't had an individual assistance declaration in over 20 years, “so this has been quite an adventure for us. It certainly would have been easier to address had the disaster been more concentrated. The vastness of it has made it a much lengthier and more complicated response and recovery—very similar to the hurricanes that traveled all the way up the East Coast.”

The hardest hit areas included Crow Agency about 60 miles east of Billings (which itself saw flooding and national news coverage when a gushing Yellowstone River carved out enough of its bottom to expose and break an oil pipeline). At Crow Agency, the home of the Crow Tribe, late-May flooding of the Little Bighorn River killed two people. About 300 people had to be evacuated, and water reached the main floor of 60 homes; 23 saw major damage.

The flood also knocked out the reservation's water and sewer systems and closed 70 miles of Interstate 90 for five days. In June, the tribe was forced to lay off 150 workers—about a fifth of its workforce—due to flooding.

About 20 miles west of Great Falls, the Sun River flooded 55 homes in its namesake city in June. Yet by mid-July, many still did not have drinking water—some wells had tested positive for coliform bacteria—and portable toilets and showers had to be brought in for residents.

In the Dakotas, aside from Minot and its immediate small-town neighbors (like Burlington, which reportedly lost about one-third of its 320 homes), the flood appears to have done its worst to low-density residential areas without the capacity or resources to mount a defense against rising waters. In Burleigh County, home to Bismarck, a marauding Missouri River damaged 450 homes; 75 were severely damaged or destroyed. Virtually all of them lay outside the city.

Across the river in Morton County, another 75 or so homes were ravaged, mostly in township developments along the river north of the city of Mandan, according to Bruce Strinden, chairman of the Morton County Board of Commissioners. While the county would like to have offered residents more protection, it could only provide sandbags and fill. The rest was up to residents. “It's extremely difficult for government entities to protect rural residences. We don't have enough people to sandbag” all the property that would have been necessary to protect rural developments, said Strinden.

The Missouri River found similar low-lying victims as it flowed southward, near Pierre and Fort Pierre and in rural developments in southeastern counties. At Riv-R-Land Estates, a private subdivision at the southeastern tip of South Dakota, 52 of the 56 homes flooded and

Continued on page 6



Linn Thomas

Amid the flood: Heartache, hard work and hope

Linn Thomas and Peggy Petry are neighbors outside Mandan in rural Morton County, N.D. In late May, the Missouri River was predicted to reach historic heights—enough to reach halfway up both homes. So the two joined forces to move out their possessions and build a six-foot wall containing 30,000 sandbags around their two houses.

“We built the Great Wall of China and moved out in eight days,” said Thomas.

The water came as predicted, and the sandbag dikes held, but they were powerless to prevent an immense influx of groundwater. Luckily, the property retained power, and both homeowners ran 15 pumps around the clock to remove thousands of gallons an hour of groundwater seepage—which they did for the next seven weeks—Thomas said during a visit in mid-July. They expected to have to keep pumping for several more weeks.

Having just come from his home—via boat—and standing on a highway-turned-boat-dock, Thomas said they've managed to keep their homes dry for the most part; both houses have water in their crawl spaces, but their main floors are dry. If the pumps go down, “in two hours, we'll have a lake in our house,” he said. By about mid-July, Thomas had burned out three pumps.

He took turns with Petry's two grown sons to keep an eye on both properties. Thomas mans the pumps four days a week, and Petry's sons cover the other days. Thomas is an employee of Morton County. “I work the most I can,” he said. “My bosses and co-workers are behind me.” The time off is unpaid, and Thomas said he has had to spend \$5,000 in retirement funds to buy pumps and other items in the fight to keep his house dry. He has no flood insurance. His wife is staying elsewhere, and the couple is getting \$477 in rental assistance from FEMA.

Despite the personal and financial toll, Thomas and Petry both put a positive spin on their predicament. Petry, for example, said her electricity bill increased from a typical \$150 per summer month to \$740 because of the constant pumping—and she seemed almost happy. “It could have been worse. I was expecting \$1,000,” she said.

Asked about having to deal with the flood since late May, Thomas said with a tired voice but not a shred of sarcasm, “We have a lot of hope.” He noted optimistically that the water level outside the dike had dropped, even though at the time it was less than an inch from peak. “We can't look a month down the road. We try to get through tomorrow.”

—Ronald A. Wirtz

Table 1
Homes waterlogged
Number of flooded houses, by water depth on main living floor, identified by August

State	Destroyed (more than 10')	Major (6' to 10')	Minor (2' to 6')	Slight damage (0.5' to 2.0')
Montana	15	102	256	221
North Dakota*	831	2,427	967	416
South Dakota	7	104	301	238

*Roughly 90 percent of the inundated homes in North Dakota were in the Minot area.
Sources: Montana Department of Disaster and Emergency Services; North Dakota Office of Emergency Services; South Dakota Office of Emergency Management