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Rio Grande reaches highest level since late '50s

David Crowder / El Paso Times

The Rio Grande stormed out of its banks Tuesday and rose as high as anyone has seen it since the late 1950s, reaching all too close to the top of the levees built to keep the river from flooding neighborhoods and farms.

Late Tuesday afternoon, the U.S. Weather Service issued a warning that the river would surge to a peak level of 9.5 feet at a monitoring point near the Courchesne Bridge south of Sunland Park Drive.

At that spot on the river, the levee is 11 to 12 feet high, said Ken Rakestraw, chief of the Water Accounting Division for the International Boundary and Water Commission, which is responsible for the levees.

Carlos Marin, the commission's acting commissioner, conceded that a 9.5-foot water level on the levee would be uncomfortably close to capacity.

"People should take the precautions they see fit," Marin said when asked about the need for evacuations. "We cannot guarantee the structural stability of the levees."

But later in the day, Weather Service Meteorologist Tim Brice said the river had quit rising.

"It looks like the initial flood wave has gone through at 9.3 feet, and now it's down to 9.2, so we're on a downward trend," he said a little before 6 p.m.

Jesus "Chuy" Reyes, general manager of the El Paso County Water Improvement District No. 1, said all of the district's main water irrigation and drainage facilities were full.

"I've never seen them like that," he said. "We've had to shut down the American Canal because for the first time since it was built, the water went over the banks, and we've rerouted the water toward the river."

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Front-end loaders rumbled along the U.S. side of the Rio Grande levee Tuesday presumably to help reinforce the endangered levee along I-10 at Porfirio Diaz. The banks of the river overflowed on the Mexican side, sending water into an adjacent road and into some structures. The river rose to heights not seen since the late 1950s, officials said.

[Photo gallery: Tuesday's flooding cripples region](#)

[Photo gallery: Storm creates severe flooding](#)

(Rudy Gutierrez / El Paso Times)

Reyes said he called the manager of the Hudspeth County irrigation district to warn him about the quantities of water heading down the river and canals.

"It may break down the banks in Hudspeth County," Reyes said. "They're in danger of being flooded."

U.S. Weather Service meteorologist John Fausett said the past few days of rain -- combined with the intensity of the downpour in a 12-hour period -- was a rare occurrence.

He said he had never seen the kind of rain reports that were coming in from around El Paso, such as the 7.5 inches -- an average year's rainfall for El Paso -- in 24 hours at the West Side's Green Elementary School and 4.8 inches near Kenworthy and U.S. 54 in the Northeast.

"When was the last time we saw this? I can't tell you, but not since 1980 when I came here," Fausett said. "This is just amazing. The magnitude is not common, especially over a major population area."

David Crowder may be reached at dcrowder@elpasotimes.com; 546-6194.

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