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Article Launched: 08/02/2006 12:00:00 AM MDT

Storm forces evacuations in small NM cities

By Steve Ramirez and Diana M. Alba / Las Cruces Sun-News

LAS CRUCES -- A state of emergency was declared Tuesday in Sunland Park as heavy summer rain washed out streets, created widespread flooding and caused the Rio Grande to overflow.

Though rain hit El Paso hardest, Doña Ana County received lots of flooding. Rushing waters caused about 1,200 Sunland Park residents to evacuate their homes as the Rio Grande swelled to a 50-year high and Interstate 10 travel toward El Paso was blocked at Las Cruces for much of the day, trapping many travelers and commuters.

The southern Doña Ana County towns of Chaparral, Anthony, La Union, and Santa Teresa were also hit hard by the rain.

Flooding was reported in those locales, prompting the activation of the county's Emergency Operations Center and coordinated efforts of law enforcement and other public safety agencies to help residents of the towns.

In Sunland Park, a recommended evacuation turned into a forced one about 2 p.m., when Mayor Jesus "Ruben" Segura ordered residents living in the colonia of Anapra to leave their homes.

Authorities used loudspeakers to alert residents, and messages were broadcast on the radio. Segura said he made the decision to protect the public.

"We don't want to take action unnecessarily, but we want the public to be safe," he said.

For the first time in at least 50 years the 8-foot depth of the Rio Grande was exceeded shortly before 3 p.m. By then, water in the river had reached a height of 9.2 feet.

"They wanted us to get out because the river was flooding," said Dolores Salazar, a 15-year Sunland Park resident. Salazar said water hadn't reached her mobile home by the time she left but was about 30 feet away.

Officers from several agencies, including the New Mexico State Police, packed the Sunland Park Police Department. Streets leading from the city to El Paso were blocked.

A short-term shelter was opened at the Sunland Park Senior Center, though city officials outlined a plan to send Anapra school students and their families to shelters at Santa Teresa High School on Tuesday night.

Segura sent a letter Tuesday afternoon to Gov. Bill Richardson informing him of the problems and asking for help from the state. Gilbert Gallegos, spokesman for Richardson, said the state Office of Emergency Management was already working with Sunland Park officials to assess the damage. Richardson was expected to be in Las Cruces today and to talk about problems related to the heavy rains.

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Tim Brice, meteorologist with the National Weather Service, in Santa Teresa, estimated that as much as 2 inches of rain fell Tuesday in Sunland Park, 2 inches in Santa Teresa, about five miles north and west of Sunland Park, 1 inch in Chaparral, and 2 inches in Anthony, N.M.

Las Cruces didn't receive nearly as much rain as areas just a few miles south. Rainfall estimates, measured since noon Monday, ranged from 0.09 to 0.67 of an inch.

The Doña Ana County Fire Marshal's Office established command centers in Chaparral, La Union and Anthony to coordinate emergency operations, and the American Red Cross

opened a shelter in the Gadsden High School gymnasiums for residents evacuated from their homes.

Chaparral residents reported flooded streets early Tuesday and were hit by more rain later in the day. In La Union, residents said erosion and debris on roads were causing difficulties

Another surge of water in the Rio Grande began pushing south, from Hatch, shortly before 5 p.m. Doña Ana County Flood Director Paul Dugie said water flows of 900 cubic feet per second were being measured south of Hatch.

The river surge was expected to reach Las Cruces about midnight Tuesday. The excess water in the river was rainwater. Water flows from Elephant Butte and Caballo reservoirs were shut off Monday.

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