

THEN & NOW



June 14, 2011

June 6, 2011

Steve and Jackie Williams' deck at the Armstrong Place, straight south of Meckling. The photo on the left was taken June 6, 2011, while the photo on the right was taken June 14, 2011.

(Photos by Jackie Williams/P&D)

DUNES

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earth and other materials to strengthen the earthen fortresses that now dominate neighborhoods that have been evacuated.

"There are two berms that have been constructed," said Lt. Col. Reid Christopherson, South Dakota National Guard public affairs officer. "There is a primary berm that goes along the waterfront itself. And there is also a secondary berm which is just being referred to as the north berm."

This particular secondary berm, covering Pinehurst Street, is now 11 feet tall. "This levee started probably the middle of last week and was completed yesterday (Monday)," Christopherson said.

Large, side rollover dump trucks, at the peak of the dike building operation, "were going by at the rate of one every 30 seconds," he said, requiring media and nearly every other resident of the area to have no access to Dakota Dunes. "Those trucks were carrying rock, clay, sand, a variety of building materials. There's been a tremendous effort to get those materials in here. It just was not a safe place to be."

The berms range in height from 6 to 11 feet. "In some cases, it isn't the height of the berm that's significant, but rather the elevation that they've wanted to build to in relation to

the projected water height on the river itself"

He admits there is a mystique to the community, occupied largely by the South Dakota residents with the resources to construct large, modern homes that surround the state's premiere golf course.

The National Guard presence, Christopherson said, isn't simply a "Dunes response." "It's a southeast South Dakota flood incident, and that area of responsibility for us really is from the Gavins Point Dam to the confluence of the Sioux and the Missouri rivers at the tri-state corner," he said.

A host of agencies is involved in what Christopherson calls "the operation" as women and men plan all of the work needed to best protect the community. One of the top officials on site is Lt. Gov. Matt Michels, who grew up in Vermillion and resided in Yankton before being elected as lieutenant governor.

"He knows the area, he knows the river, he knows the contractors and he knows the people," Christopherson said.

Also on site is the Rocky Mountain Type 2 Incident Management Team, which originally was created to respond to forest fires nationwide. "The responders for that have come in from all over the United States. They're a professional team, and they'll likely leave here tomorrow (Tuesday)."

With the dike construction nearly complete, the emphasis of National Guardsmen and other officials at Dakota Dunes

is shifting from building the walls designed to hold back floodwaters to monitoring them.

"We're now going into a maintenance phase of the levees, and we're now going to transition this afternoon into a Type 3 incident management team, and that's made up of representatives from the state of South Dakota," Christopherson said.

Those officials include the Union County sheriff, representatives of the South Dakota Highway Patrol, local county emergency management officials, and law enforcement, fire and ambulance personnel from North Sioux City. The U.S. Coast Guard, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife service, the state Game, Fish & Parks Department, and guardsmen join them.

"Functional experts from throughout the state have been brought in and they will oversee the management of this as it goes forth," Christopherson said. "The National Guard has two missions: one of them is federal ... and as guardsmen, we also have a state mission. Under that mission, we fall under the governor of the state, we are under his authority."

The National Guard has been called to help during trying times several times in South Dakota, during winter emergencies, forest fires and after the Spencer tornado several years ago.

"This is the largest state active call-up since the Rapid City flood in 1972," Christopherson said. "We

probably reached an interim peak of at least 1,200 soldiers and airmen on state active duty split between Pierre and southeast South Dakota."

Approximately 700 members of the National Guard have been pressed into service to battle the floodwaters at Dakota Dunes and other areas in the southeast part of the state. Their new home, beginning three weeks ago, is the University of South Dakota, which provides meals and living quarters for the soldiers.

"USD is taking tremendous good care of us, with everything they are doing with feeding us and housing us," Christopherson said. "We eat breakfast in the Muenster University Center dining hall, and they (volunteers from USD and Vermillion) pack sack lunches for us and they're brought down for our mid-day meal, and they serve our evening meal on the campus. There are extremely broad periods of time that they (the university and volunteers) are doing that because the operations down here are going on 24 hours a day."

The Army and Air National Guardsmen joined forces with a range of other personnel, ranging from volunteers to inmates from the state's correctional system, to fill sandbags and put them in place. Construction of the earthen berms and levees at Dakota Dunes followed.

Tuesday's increase of the release of water to 150 cfs from Gavins Point Dam serves as a

milestone in many ways, Christopherson said.

"For one, it's a record for the output of the dam," he said, "and secondly, the water is reaching the peak that was projected. So, we're watching it closely."

Water had been released at 145,000 cfs before Tuesday. It is projected that the higher flows would reach Dakota Dunes approximately 22 hours after leaving Gavins Point. "We should start seeing peak flow on Wednesday," Christopherson said.

When National Guard personnel began arriving at Dakota Dunes approximately three weeks ago, they received a warm welcome from the community's residents.

"The people have been tremendous. Naturally, they are concerned," Christopherson said, "and many of them are just physically and mentally exhausted. They have been working so hard to protect their property, their community's property, and their neighbors' properties."

"They've had to do everything from move furniture, to find alternative housing and in the meantime they've perhaps had to deal with a home-based business or a business that maybe is in an area that may be affected," he said. "There are just a lot of things in their lives that are disrupted at the moment."

It is projected that the 150,000 cfs flow from Gavins Point that began this week may not end until sometime in

August. "We're talking about most of the summer that people who are affected by this will have to react to the changes that are occurring in their lives."

The National Guard's mission soon will evolve from a construction phase to a monitoring phase. Monitoring is a 24 hours a day, seven days a week process that in some instances involves a constant physical presence on the six miles of earthen dikes and berms in Dakota Dunes.

"There is a levee monitoring patrol that does involve physically walking the dike," Christopherson said. "Two person teams have 200 to 300 meter spans that they are responsible for. They continue to walk that 24 hours a day in two shifts of 12 hours each."

"They get to know that section of levee," he said. "They're probably have nightmares when their mission is done about that 200 meters of dirt that they've looked at for so many days, but we're intentionally doing this. We want them (the patrolling guardsmen) to know that area, we want them to be able to tell if something is different this half hour compared to the previous half hour. We want them to be able to tell if anything changes so that there can be a quick reaction should a problem of some sort arise."

Personnel will also patrol housing areas, especially Dakota Dunes neighborhoods that have been evacuated, to make sure they remain secure.

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