

County rivers on the rise

By Ryan Whisner, Union regional editor | Posted: Monday, April 14, 2014 9:20 am

JEFFERSON — With the probability of minor to moderate flooding imminent, Jefferson County Emergency Management director Donna Haugom is on edge.

None of the Jefferson County rivers have reached flood stage, although all are projected to rise over the next week to levels that will cause flooding in low-lying areas.

Current forecasts take the weekend's precipitation into account, but with rain predicted for later in the week, it is difficult to tell whether the flood predictions will rise.

Haugom said the two biggest concerns are the amounts of frost still in the ground and potential rainfall.

"The snow melt has already gone through and then the next thing would be rain," she said.

Gauges along the Rock River indicated that the water levels were slowly dropping prior to this past weekend's rainfall. She described the situation as a teeter-totter.

"If any rain falls and we totter, we're going to be in trouble," Haugom said.

More than an inch of rain fell in the Horicon area during the weekend, feeding into the Rock River basin.

"We will have to keep a weather eye to the sky," Haugom said. "I think right now, we are at the mercy of any rainfall we may be getting between now and the beginning of June."

However, she was adamant that it would not flood in June.

"It is not going to flood in June because my daughter is getting married," Haugom quipped, remembering how past floods have consumed her time.

While attempting some humor, Haugom was serious in reporting that current projections show an ongoing rise in the water levels for at least the next week.

That greatly concerns Haugom, who remembers all too clearly the record highs that were reached during the 2008 flood.

Last year, amid renewed concerns of high water, city and county officials were gathering regularly as rivers rose toward dangerous levels.

The rainy days and rising rivers in April 2013 paralyzed high school sports and closed roads and businesses. However, current projections show a rise to only minor to moderate flood levels, substantially lower than last year's totals.

Haugom advised that area residents still should think about preparation for potential flooding.

"If anyone wants sand or sandbags, they should contact their town, village or city," Haugom said.

Thus far, Jefferson County has not enacted its slow/no wake ordinance for all rivers and streams within Jefferson County.

However, in Rock County, a slow/no wake ordinance was enacted along the Rock River at all public access points between Lake Koshkonong and the Beloit-Rock Town Line Road bridge.

Slow/no wake means that boats shall operate at the slowest speed possible and still maintain forward motion and steering control. Due to current conditions, it is recommended that boaters stay off rivers and streams until the water has receded to a safe level.

Water levels

Along the Rock River in Watertown, the water levels were at 4.04 feet this morning, below flood stage of 5.5 feet. At flood stage, there is widespread lowland flooding in rural areas around Watertown. Current projections show a continued rise to around 5 feet by next week.

Flood stage is labeled as a 10-year flood by the National Weather Service office.

Historical high-water marks in Watertown include 7.81 feet in 2008, 6.96 feet in 1997, 6.32 feet in April 1959 and 6.19 feet in March 1979. A high of 6 feet was recorded in April 2013, for the seventh-highest on the list.

Downstream in the City of Jefferson, the Rock River water gauge remains far below the 10-foot flood stage at 7.04 feet. Water levels are projected to continue rising over flood stage into early next week.

Based on available records, the 2008 flood, which peaked at 15.64 feet, marked the first known time the water levels had ever surpassed the major flood stage level.

The previous record in Jefferson, according to National Weather Service, was 12.84 feet set on April 2, 1979. Additional high-water records were in April 1993 with 12.29 feet, June 2004 with 11.51 feet and April 2008 with 11.35 feet.

The water level in Fort Atkinson was recorded at 13.56 feet this morning. It is projected to remain on the rise to as high as 15.1 feet by Easter Sunday, April 20. Flood stage is 16 feet.

Record levels were seen in June 2008 when the water reached 20.9 feet in Fort Atkinson.

All current river forecasts take into account past precipitation and the precipitation amounts expected within the next 24 hours.

Prior to 2008, based on Daily Union archive records, it was the flood in 1929 that topped the record books in Fort Atkinson. The recording gauge at the Rock River in Fort Atkinson was installed in 1998 and the method of recording the levels was altered.

Historically, crests in 1929, 1979, 1959 and 1993, respectively, generally have been considered to be among the highest levels recorded. Additional high-water marks occurred in April 2008, June 2004, April 2009 and July 2010.

Downstream on Lake Koshkonong, water levels were recorded at 8.20 feet. At 10 feet, water spreads into low-lying areas around Lake Koshkonong.

The record level is another seven feet higher set in June 2008 at 15.12 feet. Water levels peaked at 12.39 feet in April 2013. Current projections show an increase to approximately 10.5 feet.

At Newville, the water levels were recorded this morning at 4.65 feet. Flood stage is 6.5 feet.

No accurate records are available to reflect the water levels achieved during the 1929, 1979 and 1959 floods at Newville. However, the levels were recorded as 8.51 feet in April 23, 2013.

For the Crawfish River at Milford, the latest gauge reading was 3.8 feet, below the minor flood stage level of 7 feet.

As with other monitoring stations within Jefferson County, the record high along the Crawfish River was recorded in June 2008 at 13.59 feet. Previous records were in 1959, 11.15 feet, and 1979 10.06 feet.

Haugom pointed out that as long as the Crawfish River continued to “behave,” the overall potential flooding situation should be more manageable.

However, current projections show a rise up to 7.5 feet.

Part of the problem in 2008 was the flooding at the confluence of the Crawfish and Rock rivers in the City of Jefferson.

Also, the Bark River was reported at 3.12 feet, far below the record high of 4.6 feet and just above “action” stage.