While up, area waterway levels should decline soon

By Ryan Whisner rwhisner@dailyunion.com | Posted: Monday, April 11, 2016 10:36 am

JEFFERSON — With the potential for minor flooding imminent, Jefferson County Emergency Management director Donna Haugom is once again on edge.

None of the Jefferson County rivers have reached flood stage and all of their levels are projected to decline over the next week, decreasing the likelihood of flooding in low-lying areas.

Current forecasts take the weekend's precipitation into account, but with no rain forecast for later in the week, it is difficult to tell whether the flood predictions will change.

Haugom is regularly in communication with the National Weather Service Office in Sullivan to discuss projections for the overall season.

For 2016, the current prediction shows minimal to no flooding projected for the season, including a steady decline of water levels in June.

Gauges along the Rock River indicate that the water levels are slowly dropping prior to this past weekend's rainfall.

"Anything can happen, though," Haugom said. "Hopefully, the prediction that they say is going to be below-normal precipitation levels this summer."

She pointed out the river levels were unusually high all winter along the Rock and Crawfish rivers.

"When the Crawfish River goes high, then I'm worried because the Crawfish usually behaves itself," Haugom said. "The Crawfish got high before the Rock got high."

Heading into spring, the emergency management director monitors the water levels daily.

"I've got marks of my own that I watch for and when they are past my marks, I kind of get concerned," she said

Haugom said she has notified area municipalities, urging them to keep their stock of sandbags at the ready.

In addition, she is urging residents who live in the low-lying areas to be aware of the rising water and think about preparing for potential flooding.

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

For now, she remains optimistic that Jefferson County will experience lower water levels this year.

Three weeks ago, Jefferson County enacted its slow/no wake ordinance for all rivers and streams within Jefferson County.

Also, 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.

In addition, water levels surrounding the Bark River have forced the closure of Bark River Road in the Town of Koshkonong due to water over the roadway.

Meanwhile, along the Rock River in Watertown, the water levels were at 4.36 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 decline this 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 8.68 feet. Water levels are projected to continue declining 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 14.94 feet this morning. It is projected to remain around that level for a few days before slowly declining later in the week and into next week. 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 9.43 feet. At 10 feet, water spreads into low-lying areas around Lake Koshkonong and is considered flood level.

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 a steady decline.

At Newville in Rock County, the water levels were recorded this morning at 5.64 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 5.53.8 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 continues to “behave,” the overall potential flooding situation should be more manageable.

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 2.58 feet, far below the record high of 4.6 feet and just above “action” stage.