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Unprecedented team effort by local, state and federal agencies helps communities cope with epic winter of 2016-17 and spring flooding

BOISE - (July 6, 2017) – The epic winter of 2016-17 presented a huge challenge for local, state and federal agencies charged with managing spring runoff and flooding in southern Idaho, but an unprecedented team effort, constant communication, and advance planning helped Idaho communities cope with one of the biggest spring melt events in the last 50 years.

"This past winter and spring provided a great example of the Idaho way of responding to challenges," said Idaho Gov. C.L. "Butch" Otter. "Communities pulled together to help each other and our emergency personnel and disaster experts quickly and efficiently put their training and preparation to work. But their success was only possible thanks to the efforts of people all over Idaho who now are cleaning up, repairing damage and getting on with their lives."

Deep mountain snowpack kept building to the point where some basins had 180 to 240 percent of normal snow-water equivalent – almost two full winters worth of snow – and water managers with the Idaho Department of Water Resources, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (Corps) and the Bureau of Reclamation (BOR) all knew by February that timely flood control releases would be paramount to prevent reservoir systems from overflowing and creating floods downstream in Idaho communities.

In the Boise River Basin, the Corps started releasing flood-control releases in February, but the "atmospheric rivers" of snow that continued in February, March and April put them behind. Precipitation was 225 percent of normal in February, 325 percent of normal in March, and 195 percent of normal in April.

"We were trying to follow our flood control rule curves, but we got behind and we couldn't catch up. We kept losing space in the reservoirs," said Brandon Hobbs, Idaho Outreach Coordinator for the Corps. "Using the best information we had, we took a calculated risk of trying to manage with the space we had."

That also meant releasing high water through the city of Boise at flood stage or slightly above flood stage for four months, causing stress to the riverbanks and flooding out low-lying areas in the river corridor. Working through the Ada County Emergency Operations Center (EOC), agencies and departments at all levels of government coordinated efforts to keep the public safe, assist homeowners, and protect property.

The Corps provided sandbags and barriers to prevent the Boise River from creating a new channel by gravel pits and sending flood waters into the Boise Wastewater Treatment Plant. Ada EOC coordinated a host of additional flood-fight measures at those same gravel pits and at other areas along the river, including installation of flood diversion assets and removal of a 35,000-pound Greenbelt bridge in danger of collapse due to bank erosion.

“We got the river as high as we could without causing a major flood,” said Mary Mellema, water operations supervisor for BOR. “We weren’t going to create a major flood to prevent a possible future flood. But still, it was a very uncomfortable place to be.”

Elsewhere in Southern Idaho, IDWR Director Gary Spackman was concerned about too much snowpack stacked up in the mountains behind Mackay Reservoir and Oakley Reservoir. Holding weekly dam-safety meetings, he encouraged the dam operators to release as much water as possible, knowing that if temperatures reached into the 90s for days in a row, it would cause major flooding downstream. CORPS officials helped on a technical assistance level at Oakley Reservoir as well.

Meanwhile, the Idaho Office of Emergency Management (IOEM) has been dealing with a constant flow of damage-relief requests from many counties, starting with ice flows on the Weiser River, onion sheds collapsing under big snowloads in Washington County, huge amounts of standing water in Minidoka County in February as low-elevation snow melted, and then spring flooding in Boise, the Wood River Valley and elsewhere.

IOEM continues to play a critically important role in managing the widespread effects of Idaho’s snow and flooding disasters, officials said. Thirty-five of Idaho’s 44 counties are part of state or local disaster declarations. Twenty Idaho counties are currently under two separate Presidential Disaster Declarations. That means the detailed work IOEM does to ensure all our counties recover quickly will be ongoing.

“Even as we enter fire season in Idaho, we continue to work with counties on flooding issues,” said Brad Richy, with IOEM. “Warmer temperatures mean the record snow from this past winter in our higher elevations will continue to melt causing even more flooding. IOEM’s ongoing work with all the counties affected by snow-related flooding has reinforced the strong relationships we built over the years with county leaders throughout the state.”

Blaine County was one of the worst-hit areas because they had more than 240 percent of mountain snowpack, and no upstream reservoirs to prevent Ketchum, Hailey and Bellevue from the inevitable flooding as the snow melted. “Starting on May 8th, we were at flood stage or higher for three weeks, and we’re just getting out of it now,” said Chris Corwin of Blaine County Disaster Services.

Blaine County received more than 44,000 sandbags from IOEM and Minidoka County. A technical assistance team from the Corps helped pinpoint low-lying areas that would likely be hit by flooding. They re-armored some levees along the Big Wood River. Local flood control districts, law enforcement, fire departments, road departments and state agencies all worked together to help residents cope. “There was definitely a lot of people doing a lot of great work,” Corwin said.

All told, the Corps provided about 660,000 sand bags, 2,000 4-foot cubed super bags, and two crisafulli pumps to Idaho communities to assist with flood-prevention. The Corps provided technical or direct assistance to 13 Idaho counties.

On the advance-planning side of things, IDWR’s Water Supply Committee provided timely information for communities from the National Weather Service, Natural Resources Conservation Service Snowpack data, streamflow forecasts from multiple agencies, and the latest operational predictions from the Corps and BOR. All of those experts shared information on a daily basis to provide the latest information possible for emergency responders.

“In a year like this, the Water Supply Committee really shined in the information they provided so that communities could prepare for the worst,” Spackman said.

After peak flows have finally passed now in late June, experts agree that Idaho’s communities that dealt with flooding should reflect on the epic runoff in the spring of 2017 and look for lessons learned, potential adjustments to planning and zoning regulations regarding building in the flood plain, and weaknesses in river channel protections.

“We need to look at the river and find ways to mitigate the areas of flooding,” Corwin said.

“We will be looking at the damaged areas and see what needs to be done,” adds Doug Hardman of Ada County Emergency Management. “We will need more long-term mitigation solutions to make gravel pits and low-lying areas near the River safer and more resilient to future flooding events.”

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