

Tropical Storm Irene wreaks havoc in southern Vermont

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WATERBURY — With southern Vermont reeling from the massive flooding and power failures that hit Wilmington, Dover, Brattleboro, Bennington and Rutland, northern Vermont was still waiting Sunday evening for much of the impact from Tropical Storm Irene, the former hurricane that pummeled the East Coast.

"It's an extraordinary amount of water for us to obviously absorb and sustain. Stay in, stay safe, stay dry," Gov. Peter Shumlin said during a news conference at the Vermont Department of Public Safety, where he was monitoring the storm's impact.

"We expect further flash flooding. We have roads, bridges, culverts washed out. We have communities isolated by high levels of water."

Col. Tom L'Esperance, director of the Vermont State Police, said that while the state has sustained isolated weather problems in the past, the havoc associated with Irene throughout the state was a first for him.

"I have not seen it to this degree in my career," said L'Esperance, a 24-year veteran.

Vermont can plan on most of its major rivers to crest today after Irene pounded the state Sunday causing flash flooding, power failures, downed trees and the disappearance of at least one person in the Deerfield River in southern Vermont.

Shumlin said the Champlain Valley was projected to receive about 1.5 inches of rain per hour as it swept through northern Vermont.

"We expect the entire eye of the storm should have passed through Vermont earlier than we expected. It is moving more quickly than expected. We should see the worst of it over between 8 to 10 this evening.



"We have 10,000 plus Vermonters without power. We expect more later on. We expect more trees to fall, more limbs to fall. More rivers to crest, more flooding to come," Shumlin said about 2 p.m.

As of 5:30 a.m. Monday, more than 50,000 homes and business in Vermont still have no electricity.

The American Red Cross said more than 200 people were expected at 10 shelters across the state and possibly more would filter in during Sunday evening.

Vermont Emergency Management announced most state offices will have a delayed opening Monday. He said so-called essential employees, including Corrections, public safety, institutions, and transportation maintenance are expected to cover their regular shifts.

He said other employees have been told to plan on arriving at 10 a.m. today, but an updated message will be provided about 7:30 a.m. Monday.

"We expect in particular a similar challenge to what we had this spring," he said about the Winooski River flooding and record levels for Lake Champlain.

"Use good Vermont common sense Stay dry. Stay inside. Stay safe and we hope to minimize loss of life. Obviously we are hoping for the best for our friend in Wilmington and we will keep our fingers crossed there."

It was essential for Vermonters to stay put after the storm had passed.

"Obviously the concern for us is that's when people hop into vehicles, go out to see what happened, you have downed power lines, you have flooded roads, you have high levels of standing water," he said.

That is when people either get electrocuted, drown, or hurt by driving on water-covered roads that give way, he said.

"We're asking you to stay put even as the skies look clear. That can actually be the most dangerous time to go forward."

Wilmington police are investigating the missing woman and had released no information by Sunday night.

The unidentified woman from Wilmington was 21, Shumlin said.

"Our hearts go out to her family and the Wilmington community. We are hoping for the best there," said Shumlin, who started the news conference by expressing his "sorrow and concern."

"Needless to say it is really important for Vermonters to take this storm seriously. Stay inside. Don't stand next to rushing water, which she and her friend were doing at the time of her disappearance," he said.

"Understand that we are dealing with the forces of Mother Nature that don't usually bless us in Vermont thankfully. We need to proceed with extraordinary caution and good judgment."

He said the towns of Wilmington and Dover had been hit hard. Shumlin said the Vermont National Guard has been activated and high water vehicles are being used to try to gain entry into Wilmington, which he described as being "isolated" due to the storm. He said one effort to gain access to area is from the south through the state of Massachusetts.

He said officials were having trouble reaching a woman going into labor in the Deerfield Valley area.

As the storm moved north, L'Esperance said the 911 emergency dispatch center in Rutland was flooded. He said the emergency phone calls were being re-routed to the dispatch center in Derby in northern Vermont. He said police throughout Rutland County remain on patrol and have radio communication to respond to complaints.

More than 150 primary and secondary roads, including part of Interstate 91 in Southern Vermont have been shut down.

While the heart of the storm had not reached the state's largest city of Burlington in northern Vermont by 3:30 p.m., the area still experienced closed roads. Interstate 89 in Milton had guardrails near the Lamoille River washing out.

Burlington Police Sgt. Dennis Duffy said there were some reports of limbs coming down on power lines or cars, but no major incidents in the city. South Burlington and Winooski Police reported no significant storm related incidents.

Shumlin said the storm tracked further west and not along the Connecticut River Valley on the New Hampshire side of the state.

Brattleboro and Bennington both reported flooding, power outages, trees down. A bridge on Vermont 9 in Woodford was impassible. A boil water notice was issued in Manchester after a broken water main was reported, Vermont Emergency Management said.

Southern Vermont College in Bennington made the best of a potential bad situation for its students, President Karen Gross said. She said more than 250 first- year students and orientation leaders were on campus Sunday. She said a planned class trip was canceled, but said the field house was opened and movies were made available.

"We did not lose power and we had only a few leaks," Gross said.

She said other returning students were told their safety was the most important issue.

"You get to us safely when you can get here" was the message returning students received by email or text messages. She said some will have trouble flying in.

She said the college activated its emergency response plan and was in touch with local police and the hospital.

Rutland officials ordered the mandatory evacuation of homes on 15 streets in the southwest section of the city on Sunday afternoon.

"It's pretty hectic," Rutland Police Officer Tim Tuttle said.

The only access to the city was on South Main Street, also known as U.S. 7. The national guard was on scene and at least one nursing home was evacuated, he said.

Tuttle said the Otter Creek normally floods at eight feet and officials are expecting it to hit 14 feet.

The American Red Cross had opened 10 shelters across Vermont, while the town of Dover was using both the Mount Snow Resort and Dover Elementary School to handle displaced residents. Several other towns in southern Vermont opened shelters, while officials in Northfield opened

Northfield opened its Emergency Command Center at the police department, while the high school gymnasium was being used for those needing evacuation.

Many northern Vermonters were still wondering by early Sunday afternoon if they were going to see anything unusual.

There had been no problems or phone calls related to the storm as of noon at the Winooski Police Department, public safety dispatcher Sam Little said.

"They have everything in place if there is a problem. We can react if needed real quick," Little said.

Bill Garen, manager of the Cumberland Farms on Riverside Avenue in Burlington was kept busy as customers came in to pick up last minute items, like water, toilet paper and newspapers for Sunday reading. Most had shopped on Friday and Saturday to get essentials.

He said Cumberland Farms, which is a regional chain in Eastern United States, has protocols for hurricanes and other disasters. They include taking down the plastic digits used to display fuel prices so they don't become projectiles. Other things such as rakes and trash cans also are secured, he said. The credit card machines on the gasoline pumps also are covered with tape to avoid any driving rain from causing any possible short circuiting.

"They are a very safety conscious company. We check in every four hours with the company headquarters in Framingham, Mass. We tell them how we are doing. They just want to know if we are having any problems, if we are out of gas or out of power.

Even with little wind in Burlington, Garen was implementing the protocols.

Libby's Diner in Colchester was doing a brisk business on Sunday.

"We ordered extra food," said owner Karen Griffin. "They will eat first and hope for the best."

Griffin said she spent Saturday bringing in chairs, plants and other items at her Colchester home. She also lowered the water in her pool.

Retired South Burlington Fire Captain Ken Dattillio, who has responded to hundreds of emergencies through the years, was enjoying brunch with his wife, Sue.

"I don't miss it a bit. I'm glad I did it as long as I did. I'm glad it's over," Dattilio said. He was planning to stop by the Pines, an independent living center in South Burlington, where he works part-time to make sure residents were secure.

His wife said they had made sure they did have flashlights working and had worked on Saturday securing their camp in Grand Isle County.

Joe Gonillo and his wife Tina, were treating his twin nieces, Sydney and Madison Peet of Shelburne, to breakfast.

They had been scheduled to attend the Champlain Valley Fair, but officials there had announced on Friday that they were not going to compete with Irene.

"We were supposed to go to the fair, but we made up and went on Saturday," Joe Gonillo said. After breakfast, they were headed to Barnes and Noble to look for books.

Donald Sutton of South Burlington looked at the light rain as he walked out of St. Michael's the Archangel Chapel on Sunday morning.

He said he was not going to let some rain stop him.

"I always got to church on Sunday," Sutton, 83, said. "I get to see people I haven't seen all week."