

Town wins one flood battle, but war is in doubt

Money to head off more damage is scarce

By Christopher Smart
and Mark Havnes

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GUNLOCK - The clouds lifted and broke Saturday afternoon, to the relief of residents of this small flood-ravaged town along the Santa Clara River who cling to the hope that federal aid will arrive before the next cloudburst.

"We were nervous when this last storm came," said Roxanne Aplanalp, whose basement was flooded last month. "If we had had high water this weekend, it would have come right through here," she said of her living room.

The Santa Clara and Virgin rivers peaked Saturday at 10 a.m. after 36 hours of rain in southern Utah. The National Weather Service canceled a flash flood warning it posted Friday after the storm fell short of the Jan. 10 cloudburst that claimed one life and left \$225 million in damage.

But rather than wait for funding to dredge the silt-clogged riverbed and shore up its washed-out banks, Gunlock residents scraped together \$35,000 to hire a St. George contractor to make temporary improvements that forestalled more flooding - at least for now.

"We found the money when Washington County couldn't," Aplanalp said.

The river work began Thursday after anxious Gunlock residents appealed to U.S. Sen. Bob Bennett to get approval from the federal Army Corps of Engineers. Previously, the agency had disallowed channel clearing.

"He said you can get in the river and dredge and do what you need to do to protect your lives and your homes," was Bennett's message, Aplanalp said.

But three days of river work was all the town's \$35,000 would buy. And federal funding for more work doesn't look likely for Gunlock and its 110 residents.

"I have a feeling that we're not very high on the county's priority list," she said.

The federal Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) charged with riverbank flood repair has a \$6 million budget for work along the Santa Clara and Virgin rivers. But damage is estimated at \$66 million.

The federal money is distributed through county government.

Washington County Commissioner Alan Gardner said Saturday that the money would be used for bank work in Santa Clara and St. George, as well as channel clearing in those areas.

"There is a limited amount of money, and we had to put it at the highest priority," he said.

"Hopefully, we can get more funding. That is all we can say."

But kind thoughts will not be enough, said Gunlock resident Jay Leavitt. He has been using the equipment from his family's gravel operation south of town to help dredge the river.

"We're trying to do everything we can to protect people, but we're running out of money," Leavitt said. "If we don't get some help, we're going to lose part of this town."

Last month's surging floodwaters washed away riverbanks in Gunlock, leaving a dozen homes vulnerable to high water from the spring melt. The flood also swept away bridges on both ends of town, along with Gunlock's culinary water system and its power lines.

When this weekend's storm let up, folks began breathing a little easier, although residents continue to be anxious and frustrated, said Dennis Osmond, a board member of the Gunlock Special Service Water District. "We got really lucky this time," he said. "But the danger is not over. All that snow on the Pine Valley Mountains has got to come down yet."

A large storm and fast-melting snow would quickly wipe out this week's river work in Gunlock, Osmond said. "These banks will not hold a big river," he said.

And flood season is far from over, Washington County Sheriff Kirk Smith said.

"We're only two-thirds of the way through winter," Smith said. "It's like a war. Jan. 10 was our Pearl

Harbor. Our noses got bloodied then and there are still a series of battles to fight."

St. George and Santa Clara, too, are still vulnerable to flooding until the NRCS begins armoring unstable banks, said County Commissioner James Eardley.

Contracts for the NRCS work are expected to be awarded Monday. The first truckloads of stone to be used along the banks will begin rolling Tuesday or Wednesday, Eardley said.

The county plans on moving 6,400 cubic yards of stone a day for up to six weeks. To accommodate the heavy volume of trucks, some roads may be closed. Officials warned that motorists ignoring barricades will be fined.

Last month's flooding caused \$145 million in damage to public infrastructure. Federal Emergency Management Agency officials are working with state and local authorities to pay for most of the damage to roads and bridges and to water and sewer lines, said Dean Cox, director of Washington County Emergency Services.

Damage to private property was set at \$80 million. It was not enough to meet criteria for individual assistance from FEMA or to qualify for low-interest loans from the Small Business Administration.

The only assistance home-owners can rely on now must come from the private sector, Cox said.

csmart@sltrib.com

mhavnes@sltrib.com