

Preparation can dam the flow of flood damage

by Emmet Pierce

When heavy rains flooded the East Branch of Nimishillen Creek in July 2003, the Werner family of Louisville, Ohio, ended up with 3 feet of sewage water in their basement.

It was the first time the family ever saw the basement flood. Water from a nearby creek came within 5 feet of the house. The family figured the rare flood caused their basement problems.

But last summer, a night of heavy rains backed up sewer lines again. The Werners found several inches of sewage in their basement.

The family won't wait for a third backup, said Blaine Werner. "I'm doing what I can."

That means installing a float valve in the basement floor drain. If sewage backs up again, the float is designed to close and keep water from backing into the basement.

Installing a float drain is one of several suggestions the Federal Emergency Management Agency has for homeowners to avoid death or damage from flooding.

Flooding causes an average of \$4.6 billion in damage nationwide each year, the National Weather Service estimates.

While spring and summer months typically bring wet weather to many parts of the United States, winter storms and the precipitation they bring can also wreak havoc.

FLOOD DAMAGE - Flooding causes an average of \$4.6 billion in damage nationwide each year, the National Weather Service estimates. CNS Graphic by Bob Kast. For a number of states, especially those west of the Mississippi River, winter months produce the majority of annual rainfall. In fact, winter rains can often lead to intense flooding and mudflows, causing millions of dollars in property damage year after year.

Many U.S. residents may be at greater risk of flooding this year due to a record-breaking 2006 wildfire season that burned more than 15,000 square miles - an area twice the size of New Jersey. Affected states include California, Montana, Idaho, Washington, Nevada, Oregon, Oklahoma and Texas. The charred and

denuded ground in these areas cannot easily absorb rainwater, thus increasing the likelihood of flooding and mudflows.

In fact, severe storms have already swamped residents of Oregon and Washington with record-breaking rainfall in early November. Hundreds of homes and businesses were threatened as the storms dumped as much as 8 to 15 inches of rain in just a few days.

"The winter rainy season lasts from November through March. Homeowners, business owners and renters need to know how they can prepare for severe winter rain and floods," said David Maurstad, director of mitigation and federal insurance administrator for FEMA.

From November 2005 through April 2006, large-scale, widespread federal disasters involving floods were declared in California, Oregon, Nevada, Idaho, Missouri, Minnesota, North Dakota and Washington.

Eastern states are also susceptible to winter floods. The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration predicts an El Nino will affect weather patterns in the U.S. until spring 2007, causing wetter-than-average conditions throughout the Gulf Coast and the south Atlantic Coast, in addition to the Southwest.

Furthermore, nor'easters, which are large, low-pressure areas whose winds come from the northeast, cause severe winter storms that can lead to flooding throughout New England and the mid-Atlantic states.

Finally, spring rains and snowmelt can overwhelm the banks of the Mississippi River, placing residents of adjoining states at risk. These states include Minnesota, North Dakota, Iowa, Illinois, Missouri, Arkansas, Tennessee, Kentucky, Mississippi and Louisiana.

FEMA offers the following tips to prepare for winter flooding:

BEFORE THE STORM

- Have a safety kit with drinking water, a first-aid kit, canned food, radio, flashlight and blankets.

- Know safe routes from home, work and school that are on higher ground.

- Protect your property. Make sure that your flood insurance policy is up to date.
- Elevate water heaters, furnaces, washers, dryers and other household equipment and appliances that are used in the basement. Placing the equipment on a 12-inch wooden platform can help.
- The main electrical box should be elevated or moved from the basement to an upper floor.
- Basement electrical outlets should be elevated at least 1 foot off the floor. Maintaining an uninterrupted electrical system can allow homeowners back into their houses more quickly.
- If the house uses a septic system, a septic back-flow valve is recommended to keep sewage out of the house.
- Homeowners who use fuel tanks such as propane should make certain the tanks are anchored to a concrete slab. Floodwaters can carry away unanchored tanks, creating additional hazards and causing the fuel to spill.

DURING THE STORM

- If flooding occurs, get to higher ground. Get out of areas subject to flooding. This includes dips, low spots, canyons, washes, etc.
- Avoid areas already flooded, especially if the water is flowing fast. Do not attempt to cross flowing streams.
- Roadbeds may be washed out under flood waters. NEVER drive through flooded roadways. If your vehicle is suddenly caught in rising water, leave it immediately and seek higher ground.

AFTER THE STORM

- Do not turn electricity back on in your home if you smell gas or if the electrical system has been flooded.
- Clean and disinfect everything that was touched by floodwaters or mudflows and throw out any such foodstuffs.
- Follow directions from local officials regarding the safety of drinking water.

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