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Washed Away

Floods drown fences, pastures and crops across Colorado.

by **Bridget Beran**

During a drought, many people pray for rain. However, for the people of Colorado last fall, they got more than they bargained for. Boulder and Weld County saw the worst of the flooding, receiving more than 26 inches of rain in three days. This was a drastic increase when compared to their average annual precipitation of 15 inches. “We had a year’s worth of rain in a few hours,” says Jane Evans Cornelius of Coyote Ridge Ranch

near LaSalle. “All of the streams coming out of the mountains just flooded. There were horrible mudslides, flash floods. The short-term effect is just devastating. It’s hard to even describe.” The flooded area was more than 200 miles from north to south and affected 17 counties, wreaking havoc for farmers along the rivers. The extreme storm led Governor John Hickenlooper to declare a

disaster emergency on Sept. 12 in 14 counties. Coyote Ridge sits just five miles from the South Platte River, which caused isolation for the Cornelius family. The rushing waters left them stranded on their ranch with no way out. “We were on kind of an island of high ground and every road around us was closed. We couldn’t get anywhere. It was crazy. I mean it was just

so unbelievable. I can't describe how this happened or how fast it happened. I thought, 'It doesn't rain like this in Colorado, this is going to be fine.' I didn't leave my office for several hours even though we were getting all these warnings, thinking 'Oh come on.' And when I did leave, I almost didn't get home. Bridges were washing out and roads were closing," Jane Evans explains.

The speed of the storm was startling, leaving people and, sometimes, animals stranded. Jane Evans says, "Most people were able to get livestock out and up to high ground. But some people were not."

Thankfully for Coyote Ridge, all its cattle remained safe throughout the flood. Jane Evans attributes this good fortune to many of their cattle being pastured close to their home place on high ground. However, all their neighbors weren't so lucky.

"We have a small commercial customer, an older guy who has maybe 20 cows and bought a bull from us about 3 years ago and he lost all his cows, all his calves and the bull. They couldn't get them out fast enough," Jane Evans says with sadness.

For Kevin and Julie Ochsner of Ochsner Limousin, located along the South Platte River, the wall of water caused major problems, leaving their corrals sitting in 5 feet of water and washing away 60% of their fencing. "Anything that wasn't cemented in the ground moved. We had a creep feeder turned upside down and float from one pasture to another. We had calf sheds washed completely away," Julie explains.

The Ochsners' cattle all had to be moved, but, thankfully, all survived. "We had to evacuate all our cattle. We'd just weaned our calves five days beforehand. Talk about stress," Julie says with a laugh.

One rented pasture left 45 cow-calf pairs and 30 bred heifers stranded on top of a manure pile in a corral until the Ochsners were able to rescue them. "It's a miracle we didn't lose any of them. Initially, we could only reach them by boat.



Overflowing riverbanks and ponds left Ochsners' pasture flooded with rushing water washing away their creep feeder.

The next day, more than a dozen friends helped us trail them out to dry ground," Julie explains.

While Coyote Ridge didn't lose any cattle, Jane Evans and her family didn't get away entirely unscathed. "We had a hay crop that was just lost, I mean it was ready to be baled but it was totally insignificant when you think about what lots of people lost," says Jane Evans. Many of their neighbors who had to hustle to get their cattle moved to higher ground lost their entire hay stores. The Cornelius family donated hay to many of their neighbors so they would have something to feed their hungry herds.

"If your property was along the river, it just doesn't exist anymore," Jane Evans explains. The strength of the storm was shocking to Jane Evans, who originally ignored warnings, assuming there was no real danger.

The power of the storm affected Colorado's residents, physically and mentally. "Even though this was a 1,000-year flood, the power of that water was unbelievable. There were big, huge cottonwoods that it just uprooted like little twigs. There were huge boulders that were washed away for miles," Jane Evans says.

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Kevin Ochsner checks his cattle in a flooded pasture. Kevin came across a sight-seer with a boat who agreed to take him to look for his stranded cattle.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF KEVIN OCHSNER

Long road to recovery

Getting Colorado back to normal is going to be no small task, but the people of the area are up for the challenge. The previous year the area was rampaged by wildfires, followed by a drought leading into the floods. Two years of disasters have caused communities to become tight-knit and more than willing to pitch in and offer each other a hand.

“There was a lot of neighbor-to-neighbor support as there always is in the ag community. If people were affected, people were willing to help get cattle moved or debris cleared or fences fixed until things settled down,” said Jack Whittier, Colorado State University Extension beef specialist.

Help came from near and far according to Julie. “There were these three guys from a cowboy church in Louisiana who saw the floods on the news and felt like God was saying, ‘Hey, go to Colorado and help these people.’ They came up with a camper trailer and parked it in our yard for a week, helping us get things cleaned up and sorted out,” explains Julie. “Their church had donated all the money to get them here and they were just the nicest people. Being from Louisiana, they knew about floods and they were cattle people so they were real helpful rebuilding fences and moving cattle.”

With flooding and sinkholes, including a 17 foot drop off in one pasture, and little remaining fence, the Ochsners had to find a new home for their cattle.

According to Julie, their neighbors also came through for them in big ways. “Commercial Hereford breeder Stow Witwer graciously let us run a bunch of cows on one of his open pastures and never charged us anything,” Julie explains. “The number of man-hours people put in to help was amazing. We had hay stacked in our yard that was 4 feet deep water and the FFA chapter came and sorted through over 2,000 grass hay bales by hand into ‘good,’ ‘ok’ or ‘bad’ piles.”

The communities also got some big help from their oil and gas companies that Jane Evans says are a big part of their area.

“The oil and gas industry, which has mass amounts of heavy equipment, just jumped in full boat with that heavy equipment, bulldozing areas so that people could get into areas they used,” explains Jane Evans. “They’ve gotten some controversial press in this area with some people being very much opposed to all the drilling that’s going on but they certainly were lifesavers to a lot of people.”

“Heed the warnings and get out. Don’t just assume you’ll be able to get to higher ground. Because all our roads were closed. You couldn’t get a stock trailer out of these areas.”

— Jane Evans Cornelius

Disaster tends to bring people together and this storm was no exception. “It was wonderful to see people pitch in and help each other. That was heartwarming and rewarding,” Jane Evans says.

However, despite great efforts by the community, recovery is still a long way away. “There are areas that are still badly impacted,” Jane Evans explains. “It will be years before they get that all fixed, if ever. There are fences with debris hanging all over them or the fences are just nonexistent and some areas are still completely washed out.”

Julie adds, “Life goes on and for most farmers and ranchers there’s never enough hours in the day as is. All of the recovery and rebuilding efforts have put us really behind.”

For the agriculture in the area, it will take time to return the land to what it was. Jane Evans adds, “To this day, some fields and pastures have six to eight inches of sand and gravel on them. All fences were destroyed. You know, you’ll pass by these fields and there will be just a piece of a tractor sticking out of what used to be a hayfield.”

Lessons learned

There were a lot of takeaways for the people affected by this storm, but Jane Evans’s No. 1 recommendation is that people pay attention to their weatherman. “Heed the warnings and get out. Don’t just assume you’ll be able to get to higher ground. Because all our roads were closed. You couldn’t get a stock trailer out of these areas,” Jane Evans says.

Jane Evans anticipates that more flood control will be a big change for the area. However, there are concerns that these changes may discourage people from expanding in the region. Jane Evans says, “People will be much more careful about where building occurs. The regulations will be tighter on building in areas that could be impacted by a less serious flood.”

Jack Whittier advises, “Like everything in ranching, be prepared for the unpredictable. You have to be ready to react.”

Yet, there’s little fear of these storms affecting the farming and ranching community long-term. You can’t keep a good man down and this community proves it. “Once all this debris is cleaned up, agriculture will mostly be back to normal,” Jane Evans says.

Producers have learned to have great respect for Mother Nature and to be prepared for any challenges she may throw their way. “When you think the impossible can’t happen, we learned it can. When it comes to nature, it’s pretty much out of your control,” Julie says. **HW**