

Northern part of county recovering from violent storm

Written by By FAITH HUFFMAN, News-Telegram News Editor
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North central Hopkins County is recovering from a violent storm which damaged numerous homes, outbuildings, one school and at least seven businesses Thursday night.

Officials logged two unconfirmed reports of what was believed to be tornadoes touching down, one on State Highway 19 at FM 71 then another on FM 69 north.

Only one person was reported to have sustained injuries. A child was treated at the hospital for cuts from glass and was home in good condition before authorities were alerted.

“We were very fortunate. No one lost life or limb. I feel for the people who lost their homes and property,” Hopkins County Sheriff’s Sgt. Paul Fenimore said Friday morning.

Local storm spotters were out watching for the storm, which was reported to have spun tornadoes in Hunt County Thursday night. Emergency officials reported “formation due west in Commerce” at about 8:35 p.m., then of rotations east of Commerce in Emblem at about 8:40 p.m. A large dark mass was seen near North Hopkins School, just south of FM 71, at 8:43 p.m.

Hopkins County storm spotters reported heavy rains and low visibility on FM 71 at 9:07 p.m. Two minutes later, spotters reported “extremely heavy winds” on SH 19.

At 9:14 p.m., extremely high winds were experienced on State Highway 19 at FM 71, with visibility very limited due to torrential rains. It was believed a tornado had touched down at the intersection.

Roofs were torn off, sheet metal and piping tossed around, signs whipped in the wind, debris blew about, parked trucks shook and were moved a small distance. The mobile homes in the park on FM 71 just off SH 19 were knocked off their stilts with water and other utility pipes and lines damaged. Many businesses on SH 19 near FM 71 were damaged.

Although responders couldn’t see a funnel, they believe due to the winds and destruction, that a tornado began twisting at the intersection, continued through Birthright east before turning southeast of Dike near FM 69. Trees were uprooted, power poles snapped, transformers blown and lines strewn about. Homes throughout the Birthright to Hatchetville and North Hopkins school to Dike area sustained damages. Sheds and outbuildings were also displaced and damaged.

As soon as the intensity of the cell passed, emergency officials and volunteers began converging at Joe Bob’s store parking lot, at the SH 19 and FM 71 intersection, where Hopkins County Sheriff’s Office established a command post. Responders and volunteers were assigned roads in affected areas, then went door-to-door checking on residents, making sure all were OK. They started on the main state roads, making their way to secondary county and private roads.

Among those assisting in that effort were Hopkins County Fire Department; Texas Department of Transportation; Precincts 3 and 4 commissioners and crews; North Hopkins, Dike, Peerless, Brinker and Tira Volunteer Fire Departments; Hopkins County Emergency Medical Services personnel (who also had an ambulance staged at the command post); game wardens; Cooper Lake State Park officers; CERT; Hopkins and Delta County sheriff’s deputies;

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some HCSO jail staff; community volunteers; a Sulphur Springs Police investigator; Hopkins County Sheriff's Posse members; off-duty officers and emergency responders; Texas Department of Public Safety; and the Hopkins County branch of the American Red Cross.

"Everybody out there did an outstanding job last night. At 21:14 (9:14 p.m.) it touched down at 19 and 71. Three hours later we terminated command. All roads had been covered and houses checked," Fenimore said.

Families who were displaced Thursday night were referred to the Red Cross for assistance as needed. People who called to report power outages, unless fires were reported, were referred to their electric company.

Precinct crews were still working Friday morning to clear trees and utility crews were working to restore power to that area. State troopers were out Friday helping with traffic control as cleanup efforts began.

Hopkins County Fire Chief Kevin Yates said the emergency response was outstanding in limiting the effects of the weather.

"Three hours after touchdown, we had conducted our initial search and rescue, our assessment of the devastation path and were working on getting county roads cleared," Yates said. "The commissioners, their road crews, sheriff's office, fire departments, Red Cross — we all came together minutes after touchdown. We couldn't have asked for better response.

"Oncor made an initial assessment about an hour after touchdown last night about power outages," said Yates. "Their trucks have been out since we made the call. We're looking to get power restored."

North Hopkins school canceled classes Friday citing "weather damage and power outages."

In addition to NHISD and Joe Bob's north, North Hopkins VFD station, Sulphur Springs Plumbing, Grab and Go Burgers, Lone Star Cabinets and North Hopkins Water Supply Co. buildings were either damaged or destroyed.

The city of Cumby was ready to sound its emergency sirens as the storm progressed west from Commerce, but within two minutes decided to stand down as it was apparent the cell would miss the town.

Sulphur Springs Police Department called in at least two officers to monitor weather conditions and stay in contact with the NWS. No damage was reported in Sulphur Springs and as the cell was north of town, the city's sirens were not sounded Thursday night.

However, residents in the south part of town reported power out for about an hour, and in town, most residents reported the power flickered a few times.

Hopkins County didn't get the brunt on the violent weather. Five people were slightly hurt and hundreds of homes and businesses lost power in other parts of Northeast Texas.

Officials with an ambulance service in the Greenville area on Friday reported five individuals taken to hospitals.

Michael Shields with American Medical Response says nobody suffered injuries believed to be life-threatening in Thursday night's storms.

Hunt County Sheriff Randy Meeks originally said four people were hurt when a suspected tornado destroyed a farmhouse and a mobile home near Merit. Shields on Friday said the number of injured had reached five. He didn't provide details on the patients.

Electric provider Oncor on Friday reported more than 1,200 outages, mainly in the Hunt County area.

The Denton area Thursday had hail the size of grapefruits.

— The Associated Press contributed to this story.