

Floods cover Navajo Nation, NDOT steps up with road maintenance



Rock Point Chapter was hit especially hard by monsoon rains in mid-Sept. 2013. This aerial photo south of Rock Point shows the flooding on both sides of U.S. Route 191. (Photo by Rick Abasta)

WINDOW ROCK-The flood waters have finally receded.

For over a month, the Navajo Nation received several inches of rainfall from the monsoon rains, giving life to the high desert plants and challenges for reservation travelers in the process.

According to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, the Navajo Nation received over 150 percent of the normal amount of precipitation. Portions of Coconino and Navajo County received almost double the normal monsoonal rainfall.

"We have been working the two months to address washouts and flooding across the Navajo Nation," said Paulson Chaco, director of Navajo

Division of Transportation.

Chaco said NDOT staff worked late into the night and on weekends to get the roadways cleared.

"The storms first hit the Eastern Agency in mid-August and continued through into the month of September for the Chinle Agency," Chaco said. "We utilized funds that were earmarked for FY 2014 road maintenance projects to address the flooding.

"The Navajo Nation needs to do a mitigation plan for these flood plains," he added.

On August 21, 2013, the Navajo Nation Commission on Emergency Management met at the Navajo Transportation Center Emergency Operations Center and declared a state of emergency due to damag-

es from and in response to torrential monsoonal flooding throughout the Navajo Nation.

The declaration was passed by a vote of 4-0.

The Commission stated the Navajo Nation sustained damages exceeding the one million dollar threshold for the Federal Emergency Management Agency's major disaster declaration.

Tribal programs suffering damages from the storm included Fleet Management, Motor Pool, Body Shop, Navajo Environmental Protection Agency, Department of Justice, Navajo Nation Council Chamber, Navajo Nation Zoo, Navajo Tribal Utility Authority, and Bureau of Indian Affairs offices.

The declaration listed

21 Arizona chapters that sustained damages, plus 26 chapters in New Mexico with similar damages, and six chapters in Utah that were also adversely affected by the weather conditions.

In addition, 50 earthen dams, excluding federally-listed dams under the Safety of Dams, were breached from the heavy rainfall.

Signed by CEM Commissioner Herman Shorty and Navajo Nation President Ben Shelly, the declaration allowed the Navajo Nation to coordinate emergency and disaster relief with non-tribal entities.

Chaco said although NDOT was not in the business of maintaining dams, his crew worked feverishly on Sept. 14 to prevent the Crownpoint

Dam, located behind the old PHS housing, from breaching.

Lyneve Begaye, an archaeologist with the NDOT Project Planning Department, said she assisted with emergency services in Crownpoint.

“Crownpoint Dam needed monitoring for environmental and archaeological services. We also took out water and supplies for residents,” Begaye said.

NDOT staff utilized a six-inch pump owned by the division to begin pumping water out of the dam to relieve pressure. Begaye and others also began filling and stacking sandbags to hold back the water.

Begaye said, “We ended up sandbagging and clearing an area for our blade and loader to cut a spillway into the dam to relieve the pressure.

With assistance from the Department of Water Resources, a deep spillway was cut into the dam and a flooding disaster for the community was averted.

On Sept. 16, President Shelly requested for assistance from FEMA to address the damages from the storm.

Recently, NDOT Department of Roads released a report titled “Operation Storm Surge,” which tracked their efforts with flood road maintenance activities from the past month.

The eight-page report detailed the scope of work provided by NDOT road crews during recent rain storms and floods across the Navajo Nation.

For the Chinle Agency, 27 routes were cleared. The six washouts and one sinkhole in the area resulted in 81.6 miles of road that was bladed and reshaped and 2,024 cubic yards of road that was backfilled.

Using the manpower of 14 NDOT personnel and seven heavy equipment vehicles, the total cost for the road maintenance was \$37,233. Fleet expenses amounted to \$24,309 and personnel expenses totaled \$12,923.

Work began on Sept. 3, with an assessment of the Chinle Agency and briefing meeting at the Incident

Command Center at Wildcat Den. Road maintenance activities concluded on Sept. 20, with washout repair and culvert backfill on N8068 in the Tachee and Whippoorwill area.

A total of 52 road maintenance projects were completed, with assistance from the Bureau of Indian Affairs, which worked on 12 of the projects.

The Department of Roads also released a second report, detailing work performed in the Tonalea and Cow Springs area from Sept. 4 through Sept. 13.

There were six washouts and one sinkhole in the area and NDOT road crews cleared five routes of sediment and debris. A total of 15.1 miles of road was bladed or reshaped. A total of 411.47 cubic yards was backfilled.

The total cost for efforts in the Tonalea area amounted to \$26,580. Travel expenses were 1,920. Fleet expenses were \$14,244. Personnel expenses amounted to \$9,147.

Routes that were addressed in the area by NDOT road crews included 6011, 6260, 513N, 6270, 6269, N631, and 213.

NDOT worked with the BIA Force Account crew to address flooding in the San Juan Chapter area, which had five routes that were flooded and three sinkholes.

Crews cleared the area in four days.

Interstate 40 near Tohajilee was temporarily closed to one lane by New Mexico Department of Transportation on Sept. 13, after a 20-foot sinkhole was discovered in the center of the freeway.

Another area of concern was U.S. Route 491, which was momentarily closed, after the rainstorms flooded the damaged roadway between Naschitti and Sheep Springs.

NMDOT road crews cleared the roadway and opened it up to traffic.

Information:
www.navajodot.org



Navajo Division of Transportation director Paulson Chaco inspects a temporary bridge built by residents of Pinedale Chapter, after their old bridge was washed out after the storms. Joining him is heavy equipment operator Cornelius Kenny. (Photo by Rick Abasta)



Homes alongside U.S. Route 191 in the Many Farms area were flooded for days before the water began to recede. Here, Apache County Sheriff's Office perform a welfare check on residents stranded by flooding. (Photo by Rick Abasta)



Access roads off U.S. Route 191 south of Chinle were completely flooded. BIA and NDOT road crews worked steadfastly to clear roads of sediment and debris. A bulldozer is visible in the distance. (Photo by Rick Abasta)