



Southern Idaho was hit in early February by winter snow and rainfall, resulting in severe flooding in 22 counties, including Cassia County.

Photo by Reeder Flying Service

## Nature's Worst of Times

*February flood brings out the best in community volunteers*

By Dianna Troyer

As icy water raged across their fields and pastures east of Malta in early February, Kevin and Trudy Tracy rescued calves from newly formed islands and moved them and their cows to higher ground.

Meanwhile, in town, Travis and Jennifer Whitaker watched their friends and neighbors rescue their home as volunteers piled sandbags around their home to protect it from melting snow and torrential rain that

could not soak into the frozen ground.

Although the Raft River Valley's historic February flood finally receded, residents are still dealing with the aftermath. Until weather improves, some repairs cannot be made and crucial questions cannot be answered, such as how the flooding affected crops that had been planted in fall, irrigation pumps that were submerged, canals and head gates, roads, culverts and bridges.

"The flood sure tested us," said Jay

Black, president of the Raft River Flood Control District board of directors. "We're surprised at the amount of sediment left."

While residents could not count on getting a break from rain and melting snow, they knew they could count on each other.

During the second week of February, hundreds of volunteers—including Raft River High School students—filled sandbags at the school parking lot and delivered them to homeowners.



**Above, friends and neighbors rushed to try and block water from Travis and Jennifer Whitaker's house south of town.**

Photo by Sheena Evans

**Brooke Christensen, Desi and Ryker Carson, Ellie and Amber Harris, and Isaac Powers fill sandbags.**

Photo by Jackie Harris

"We must have filled about 20,000 sandbags that week," said Eric Boden, school principal, estimating each bag weighed about 40 pounds. "We delivered them to at least 25 homes."

For several days, he allowed students to spend part of their day filling bags provided by law enforcement and emergency service agencies with sand from local highway districts.

"For our students, this was a lesson in community service," Eric said. "It was wonderful to see so many people helping and smiling."

At one home, water was too high for vehicles to use a driveway, so an assembly line of volunteers passed bags 50 yards.

"Even with their boots on, the icy water was so high that students had frigid, wet feet for a couple of hours, but

they kept on working," said Eric.

Raft River Rural Electric Cooperative staff was among the volunteers.

"We wanted to help in any way we could," said RREC General Manager Kurt Anderson. "Our staff used forklifts to help move the sandbags and backhoes to clear debris and divert the water."

Jay said several unusual weather factors occurred simultaneously to cause the flooding.

"It happened all over southern Idaho, not just here," he said. "The ground was still frozen when we had a snowstorm followed by sudden warm temperatures and rain. All that moisture couldn't soak into the ground."

The frozen ground was not all bad. It enabled volunteers to use heavy equipment to clear out canals and other areas

to divert the runoff.

"After a few days, warm temperatures thawed the ground, and it got so soft you couldn't use heavy equipment anymore," said Jay.

Cassia County was among 22 counties assigned a disaster declaration from the Idaho Office of Emergency Management.

Throughout the valley, the sandbags—along with large hay and straw bales—will remain in place for a while, with spring snow and rain still in the forecast.

"We don't know how much heavy moisture is still ahead of us," Jay said.

Sandbags are still at the school in case they are needed.

"We still have 4,500 bags and have become experts at filling them quickly," said Eric with a smile. ■