

A Meteorologist's Thoughts on "The Flood of the Century"

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Eastern North Carolina is prone to hurricane strikes and has a storied past with such monstrous storms. Why then did this years assault of storms cause "The Flood of the Century?" To answer this question we need to review the events that led up to the disaster.

The tropical storm season was predicted to flourish this year and it did. Hurricane Dennis approached North Carolina from the south in late August. Rain bands began to lash eastern North Carolina on August 30th. Even though the eye of Hurricane Dennis didn't cross the coastline, rain totals exceeded two and half inches. This seemed to be a blessing, as much of the area was 5 to 10 inches below normal rainfall for the year.

The steering current winds for Hurricane Dennis relaxed and left the storm adrift over the Atlantic east of North Carolina in early September. It is rare for a storm to leave North Carolina moving northeast and then to return, but "Dennis" made a second visit. On September 4th, Tropical Storm Dennis, after drifting southward for days, moved inland from the east-southeast.

Rainfall from this second Dennis assault totaled over 6 inches. The majority of this rain fell over the Neuse and Tar river basins. With rainfall of nearly a foot within 10 days, these rivers were projected to have minor flooding. As these rivers were nearing their projected crests another major hurricane, Floyd, was brewing over the southwestern Atlantic.

Hurricane Floyd was a major hurricane that moved toward eastern North Carolina from the south. As the hurricane neared, winds became easterly. This produced surface

converging winds over eastern North Carolina and led to a steady heavy rain on September 14th. The rain continued on the 15th as the hurricane neared. The eye of Floyd made landfall in the early morning hours of the 16th. In three days, over 15 inches of rain fell on Greenville, NC. Flash flooding was widespread during the hurricane, but the worst was yet to come.

The Tar River reached record levels in Rocky Mount and Tarboro—so high that the gauges that measure the levels were completely submerged. As chief meteorologist for the local CBS affiliate, I took to the air to see the breadth of the flood. I saw the Pitt-Greenville airport submerged; cars and planes beneath the murky water. I saw rooftops, but few yards. I witnessed helicopter rescues from north Greenville. For the next week, my TV station was on-air constantly, giving information about what roads were closed and where to get free ice, water, and other necessities to survive. Thousands were suddenly homeless and many others were without power or clean drinking water.

I will never forget the sights I saw from the helicopter, or the emotional moments of seeing people talk about their personal losses. I will remember seeing the President of the United States visit the flood ravaged area and promise federal assistance. However, the most touching experience was when a little boy at a shelter told one of our reporters he had a message. He faced the camera and showed a crayon drawing that said, "Please help us. We need food and clothing." He was about 5 years old. My memories of the "Flood of the Century" will last my lifetime.