

NEWS FROM THE PORTLAND AREA AND THE NORTHWEST

The Northwest | Wilson River revisited

## Where floods raged, resolve now flows



LORI TOBIAS/THE OREGONIAN

Derrick Josi, a fourth-generation farmer on this land in Tillamook County, was able to save all but one calf when this levee broke on his family's farm and the Wilson River engulfed pastures, an RV park and the heart of a north Tillamook business strip.

### Inside

Josi's story plus a trailer owner who has had to start over and a tourist business that had to dig out/**Page B4**

Tillamook, inundated in November, is working on "our last hope" to prevent another disaster

By LORI TOBIAS  
THE OREGONIAN

TILLAMOOK — Nothing about the flood fit the pattern. Usually, the big water comes in the spring when heavy rains ride in on the Pineapple Express, melting the mountain snowpack in a rush and swelling the rivers until they surrender their banks.

But this was fall. The snow had barely fallen. Locals were expecting only nuisance high waters, the kind they take as a matter of course from the Wilson River as it flows 40 miles down from the Coast Range to Tillamook Bay.

Instead, the river rose to record-breaking levels, spreading so much ruin that Tillamook County has received more than 40 percent of the federal relief money provided so far to

four counties declared disaster areas in the November floods.

Yet from the devastation has come a renewed community spirit intent on finding solutions to ensure the destruction doesn't happen again.

"If you talk to people on the streets, they say this is our last hope," said County Commissioner Mark Labhart. "I would like Tillamook to be known as the land of trees, cheese and ocean breeze, instead of, 'Oh, you are the ones that flood every year.'"

County officials want to remove some old dikes so floodwaters can flow to the bay more quickly, relocate businesses and homes in vulnerable areas and elevate others that have been hit before.

As the storm moved in that first

Please see **TILLAMOOK**, Page B4



TILLAMOOK FLOODS

Wilsonview Dairy

# Dairy farming family is now herding the mud

When the river water subsided on the Josi family's Wilsonview Dairy, the mud it left behind was 3 and 4 feet deep in places. Logs, gravel and silt damaged 150 of the farm's 300 acres.

Even after five months, the work to reclaim the pastureland is only half finished.

"This wasn't a normal flood," says third-generation farmer Don Josi. "When you get one this high, it does all kinds of damage. It just can't be helped."

The neighbors sold their cows because the mud made it impossible to get them from the barn to pastureland, Josi says. The Josis were lucky to have surplus feed so they didn't need to get the cows to the pasture right away.

He hasn't begun to tally all the damage to the farm caused when the Wilson River chewed a 500-foot-wide hole in the earthen levee on his land

### Wilson River flood

Heavy rain in November — including 13.2 inches in the Coast Range on Nov. 6 — swelled the river to a record level.



about five miles east of town. There's no insurance. "I don't know that we could afford flood insurance down here," he says. The farm, developed by his grandfather in the 1920s,

is on the Wilson River flood plain. The big expenses come from the extra feed he must now buy, at about \$1,500 twice a month, and the equipment — rototiller and box scraper —

necessary to reclaim the fields so the cows can graze again. And then there's the diesel for the farm equipment, double in price over recent years, Josi says.

"It could be \$100,000 easily by the time we get everything done," he says. "It would be a lot more if we didn't do all the work ourselves."

Josi expects it will be June before the pastures are reseeded and July before all the debris is cleared. And just as he has been since November, he'll be there along with the rest of the family working round-the-clock until the job is done.

He did take one day off on Jan. 12. "I had to see my grandson," he says.

That would be Bryson Josi, a member of the family's fifth generation, born at St. Vincent's Hospital in Beaverton to son Derrick.

—Lori Tobias

"I would like Tillamook to be known as the land of trees, cheese and ocean breeze, instead of, 'Oh, you are the ones that flood every year.'"

Mark Labhart,  
Tillamook County commissioner

## Tillamook: November flood damage hit \$12.5 million.

Continued From Page B1

week of November, forecasters predicted the Wilson River would crest at 12.5 feet, a half-foot above flood stage, sometime on the afternoon of Nov. 6. But in only 24 hours, the river rose from 6 feet to 22.85 feet.

And just when it seemed it couldn't get any worse, the river breached a private levee on a stretch of river about five miles from the center of town, engulfing pastureland and the heart of a north Tillamook business strip on U.S. 101.

The flood caused \$12.5 million in damage throughout the county. It wiped out or significantly damaged 70 homes, destroyed at least 14 trailers and damaged 85 other buildings. Nearly 100 people had to be rescued that night, and 75 cows perished.

The Federal Emergency Management Agency declared the county a disaster area, along with Clatsop, Hood River and Lincoln counties; Tillamook County has received \$406,638 so far.

Labhart said FEMA plans to pay about \$2.1 million to relocate and raise homes and businesses.

But money is just the starting point, he said. If the county is to protect itself in the future, bigger changes must come — and in the past, that's been a problem.

Calls to move structures and remove old dikes have met with resistance either because people didn't want to make the changes or because of environmental concerns.

This flood, however, galvanized people, Labhart said.

"We know we are always going to have floods, but we don't want to have unacceptable flooding impacts," he said. "And that's the stickler. How do we do that?"

The county hopes the state will help it figure that out.

County commissioners, the city of Tillamook and legislators have asked Gov. Ted Kulongoski to designate the county as an Oregon Solutions Project. The program helps communities with problems by bringing in experts to brainstorm fixes.

The state expects to make a decision in several weeks.

"People said, 'OK, we've had enough; this is it,'" Labhart said. "We've had millions of dollars of damage, and we cannot do this again."

Lori Tobias: 541-265-9394; lortobias@aol.com

Linda Mason

## River couldn't take feelings of 'family'

Some folks got mad at Linda Mason on that Sunday night in November when she urged them to get their trailers and RVs to higher ground. They thought she was being a drama queen.

But Mason was worried. The Wilson River RV Park sits right on the water's edge with space for about 70 trailers. She figured she'd be fine — the 23-foot 1990 Emerald Comfort fifth-wheel that she'd just paid off was farthest from the river. But her neighbors might not be so lucky.

By the next morning — Monday, Nov. 6 — the water had moved within 100 feet of her doorstep and was rising fast. Mason, 49, grabbed her dogs, a cat, a bird, food and a blanket and got out.

Today, Mason lives at the Big Spruce RV Park in nearby Netarts. She has a 28-foot 1968 trailer she bought for \$1,000 and is paying off out of her disability check.

She managed to salvage two boxes from the waterlogged trailer by the Wilson River, but hasn't had the heart to even see what's in them.

"I've lost everything. All I have has been donated."

But she does have friends and neighbors in Netarts who know exactly what she went through. Two spaces over in Netarts, Karen and Cliff Guidon live in a 30-foot Midas trailer that the Tillamook Chamber of Commerce arranged to have donated to them.

They also lost their trailer in the Wilson River flood. They'd hoped to salvage it, but then the health inspector came along.

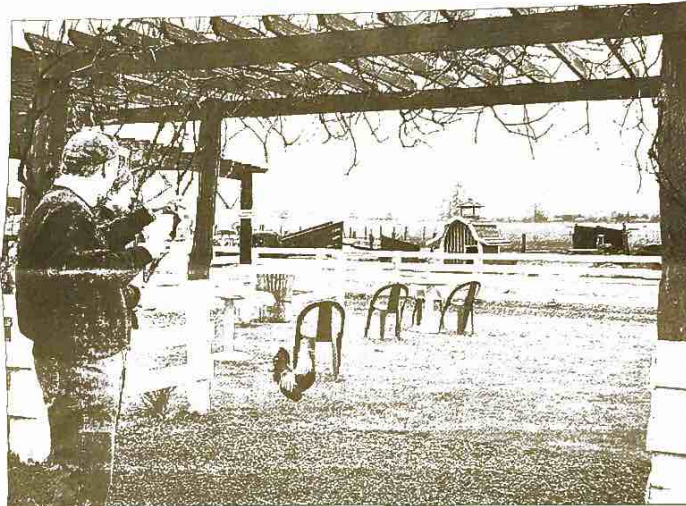
"We had black mold," says Cliff Guidon, 74. "The inspector said, 'I'll give you a \$120,000 fine if I see you in it.'"

Another Wilson River refugee, Kathy Hodgdon, 58, also makes her home in Netarts in a donated motor home. At 22 feet, it's 13 feet smaller than the trailer the river claimed, and she still owes \$300 on that. But this one is drivable, though the tags are expired, and "I can't drive," says Hodgdon with a shrug.

Although they've lost almost all they had to lose, the small group of transplants is largely philosophical about the flood.

"I'm happy out here," says Mason. "I can take my dogs to the little beach. I just don't take anything for granted. It has made a lot of us... we were neighbors, but now we are like close family."

—Lori Tobias



LORI TOBIAS/THE OREGONIAN

Denny Pastega and daughter Jessica had to close the Blue Heron Cheese Company for 39 days when a levee broke on a nearby farm, causing the Wilson River to change course and rush over fields and businesses in the area, including his property along U.S. 101.

### Blue Heron French Cheese Company

## Bricking up: 'It can happen again'

Denny Pastega took the animals from the petting zoo and closed up his Blue Heron French Cheese Company about noon on Nov. 6. He figured he'd be closed a day or so until the predicted floodwaters receded.

"We were planning on another nuisance flood," says Pastega. But as night fell and the rain pounded, Pastega worried: Was this truly a minor flood? A landslide had closed Oregon 6, and police barricades blocked the flooded Wilson River Loop and U.S. 101, both leading to his shop.

He wanted to go back to check on the Blue Heron, on 101 in north Tillamook.

"We pleaded with the police on the phone to let us through. I told them, 'While we are sitting here, the animals are probably dying.'" But the police weren't budging, so Pastega could only wait at home, wondering about the fate of his animals.

Finally, Pastega and two friends climbed into the cab of a borrowed semi. Guards at the first roadblock let him through, but warned that the U.S. Coast Guard up ahead would not. Pastega never gave them the chance.

"They were getting out of the car to stop us, but we just kept going," he says, shaking his head in wonder. "My heart was pounding. There was a wake of water that was 7 or 8 feet deep ahead of us."

It was nearly midnight when they arrived at

the Blue Heron, a gourmet food and gift shop about three-quarters of a mile from the Wilson River. The ponies' heads were just above water. Pastega and his friends worked in the downpour to move the animals and some of his collection of antique cars and farm equipment to higher ground.

In the morning, Pastega found that four miniature goats and two sheep had drowned. His antiques were coated in mud and slime, and about half of a 2-mile fence was destroyed. Inside, Christmas displays, gifts and food were scattered across the floor, waterlogged and muddy.

It would be 39 days before the Blue Heron opened again. By then, he'd missed almost the entire Christmas season.

Pastega figures his damages were at least \$500,000, and he lost at least \$250,000 more in revenue during the time he was closed. Still, he counts his blessings. He had insurance, which covered more than half of the damage.

But work to "floodproof" the old building continues. Pastega is bricking exterior wood walls all the way up to the windows.

No one thought the dike on the nearby Josi farm would break, he says, sending water coursing over roads and fields. But now: "It happened once. It can happen again."

—Lori Tobias