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# Sierra spilled payload early

■ Eight inches of warm rain turn snow from white to clear above Mammoth Pool.

**By Russell Clemings**
The Fresno Bee

Thursday dawned warm and wet in the Sierra Nevada's mid-altitudes, and that's how the trouble began.

Far above Fresno on the San Joaquin River, at the Devils Postpile National Monument, elevation 7,000 feet, the temperature was in the low 40s, and it began to rain.

One day before, heavy snow had covered the ground at the remote scenic spot. But by midnight, the National Weather Service recorded more than 8 inches of rain.

The snowpack melted.

A short distance downstream, Southern California Edison's Mammoth Pool Reservoir was half empty when Thursday began. By 4 p.m., with water surging in from all three of the San Joaquin's main forks, it was filled to overflowing.

And with that began the greatest flood in the modern history of the San Joaquin River.

In 24 hours, Mammoth Pool, with a 119,000 acre-feet capacity, would pass 101,000 acre-feet over its spillway.

Below Mammoth Pool lay a series of smaller hydroelectric dams — Dam 6, Redinger, Kerckhoff. One by one, the little dams took the big surge and passed it down the line until at the very end it reached the last and largest dam, Friant.

Always before, when a big flood came down the San Joaquin River, Friant caught it. After a wet Presidents Day weekend in February 1986, it released 15,500 cubic feet of water a second, and brown waves lapped at the fringes of the Woodward Bluffs Mobile Home Park in Fresno.

But this time, the surge was too much, too early in the season. Since the day after Christmas, Friant's operator, the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation, had been releasing ever-larger amounts of water. But they weren't enough.

At 8 p.m. Thursday, the surge reached Friant. Quickly it filled Millerton Lake behind the big dam until Friday morning, when the bureau unleashed a flood four times as big as the one in 1986.

Official logs record the flood's progress:

Inflows reached their peak late Thursday as 95,000 cubic feet a second entered Millerton. Most was from Mammoth Pool, where a peak of 77,000 cubic feet a second was spilling. A little bit more came from undammed tributaries and from Bass Lake, which spilled a peak flow of 3,770 cubic feet a second.

None of the watershed's other reservoirs — Shaver, Huntington, Florence, Edison — spilled a drop.

It didn't matter; Mammoth Pool was spilling enough for all of them.

The San Joaquin's channel can carry 8,000 cubic feet a second without flooding. But at 3 a.m. Friday, it was carrying 25,500 cubic feet a second, just short of the benchmark 100-year flood level of 28,000 cubic feet a second.

And the worst was yet to come.

Hour by hour, ever-larger amounts of water cascaded over the dam's spillway and roared downstream.

At 4 a.m., 30,000 cubic feet a second. At 6 a.m., 35,700. At 7 a.m., 37,100.

At 8 a.m. came the peak, as 59,700 cubic feet a second left the dam, swept over Lost Lake Park, inundated a small fortune in gravel mining equipment and drove dozens of mobile home residents to shelters.