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Valley residents marvel at effects of raging river

■ Houses to hatchery, nursery to golf course, no one is unaffected.

By Jim Steinberg
The Fresno Bee

Water roaring from atop Friant Dam brought Tom Hosler, 37, of Fresno, an Orsi science teacher, to see history Friday, to see "what water can do."

Every second, he said, 60,000 cubic feet of it rushed from Millerton Lake through and over the dam. Imagine 60,000 large cubed beach balls moving out and away every second.

Harold and Carla Mathis spent the night seeing what water could do. They moved their belongings from downstairs in their 3,000-square-foot house on the San Joaquin River to the higher floor.

Harold Mathis, a retired executive, wasn't worried that the powerful river would wash away his house.

"I built it myself," he said. "Concrete block. A foundation you wouldn't believe."

Water couldn't reach his worldly goods now, he said, unless it rose another 12 feet, but it had carried off two cords of wood as if the logs were corks.

Just downstream rested a large, silver-colored propane tank that had dislodged from the San Joaquin Hatchery operated by the state Department of Fish & Game. The hatchery raises trout, and the Millerton water had washed prized fish into the San Joaquin.

Other fish took short loping dives out and back into the water not far from Mathis' home. In the distance, several houses sat in deep water, about half of them showing above the new, abnormal river level.

Cliff Finch, 48, of Cliff Finch's Zoo Nursery, said water had reached the eaves of the houses across the way and crawled up their roofs.

He guessed that his nursery

would happen, but he felt the urge to take advantage of the jumping fish. He left to pick up a fishing license.

Anna and Tom Kastner, 32 and 36, said the water had taken "all our stuff."

Authorities told them at 11 p.m. Thursday to plan to evacuate within three hours. At 1:30 a.m. Friday, they were told to get out in five minutes.

Three households they knew of had lost 100 percent.

The trout had been washed out of the hatchery where she worked, Anna Kastner said.

She said a diamondback rattlesnake had washed up just a few paces from where she stood. They're excellent swimmers, Tom Kastner said, but were probably too cold to endanger anybody.

No, it was a common garden snake, not a rattler, said sheriff's Lt. Joseph Blohm, who drove around the flooded area with Deputy Robert Worststein.

"My people are evacuating the west side right now," Blohm said.

He mentioned Firebaugh and Mendota.

Worststein and Blohm drove up to Millerton Lake, and stood just feet away from the water. Thursday, this lake reached to about 8 feet below the high water mark, Worststein said. Now it was a foot or two from the high water mark.

The beautiful day carried hints of further threat.

"It's clouding up," Worststein said, "but it's supposed to be colder."

"They cut back the water release to stabilize things," Blohm said. "Now they're going to open up again."

He and Worststein talked about the water's power to slam logs and other debris against bridge supports, increasing water pressure on the bridges.

"It wouldn't surprise me to lose Skaggs Bridge," Blohm said.

Nobody was ruling out anything.

ing holes, one on either side of the bridge. The flow seemed to have a hypnotic hold over them and others separated by the river.

They stood on either side of this force, the Fresno and Madera sides, and just stood and watched some more, spellbound.

"Three to four hours ago, you couldn't see the bridge at all," Carbajal said.

Breckenridge looked at a piece of telephone cable.

"It was attached to the bridge," he said. "Now it's down there somewhere."

The water that did this to the bridge also flooded onto the course of the Fig Garden Golf Club and on to the course of the San Joaquin Country Club.

Chris Floth, assistant golf pro at the San Joaquin club, said that water covered holes one through three, 12 through 18 and the fourth tee.

"It's incredible," Floth said.

Farmer Otis Loring, 67, grows oranges about four miles west of the dam. He accepted too much rain.

He didn't worry, "not a bit," about the dam up from his oranges, and he saw value in the flooding.

"This should be a wake-up call for people who want to subdivide the river bottom," Loring said.

books, blankets, cribs, food. She thought the birth of her son, Tyler, 20 months old, had opened her to do more for other people.

"I hope someone would do the same for me," she said.

enue and the Big Creek fire.

"You know something?" she said. "These bad times really pull people together. There are no differences."