

Agencies prepared for worst

■ Steps taken in anticipation of El Nino and in response to 1997 floods have paid off.

By Tom Kertscher
The Fresno Bee

Steps taken last year by government agencies are helping the Valley slosh through the latest round of storms.

Although some preventive measures were taken in fear of El Nino, many were triggered by the January 1997 floods or were done during routine reviews of operations.

Several meetings to teach government agencies about the weather phenomenon El Nino were held last fall. They prepared emergency service officials for the worst, should it come to that, said Roy Manning, coordinator of the state Office of Emergency Services in Fresno.

"The counties that have been involved in these workshops have a better appreciation for their role," he said.

Predictions of the heavy precipitation El Nino could bring spurred the California Department of Transportation to start certain maintenance work in late summer, a month or more ahead of schedule, said Caltrans spokesman Steve Saville.

Crews got a jump on cleaning the tens of thousands of culverts, drains and ditches from Merced County to Los Angeles County, Saville said.

It's impossible to know whether that work eased the effects of the recent storms, but attention on El Nino infused the workers, he said.

"We went out there and made sure that everything was up to par," Saville said.

In some cases, talk of El Nino sparked efforts that haven't been needed — yet.

Madera County ordered 20,000 sandbags but had given out only a few hundred as of Wednesday, said Undersheriff Tom Turk, who oversees emergency operations.

"So far, we haven't had a lot of calls for them. We've been lucky," he said.

And the Lower San Joaquin Levee District, which manages 195 miles of levees along the San Joaquin River in Fresno, Madera and Merced counties, hasn't had to use any of the sandbags, plastic tarps and other supplies it ordered last year in twice the usual quantities, said District Manager Reggie Hill.

Other agencies, however, have benefited from extra measures taken last year, even if they weren't related to El Nino.

In December, the Fresno County Office of Emergency Services updated its phone list of emergency services personnel from various agencies.

"It is one of the most important tools we have because we rely so strongly on communications," said John Thomas, emergency services coordinator.

Similarly, two portable pumps purchased in October by the Fresno Metropolitan Flood Control District have come in handy.

The pumps are used to move water from one ponding basin to another, or from ponding basins to canals, to avoid flooding.

In other cases, agencies simply feel better prepared because of steps taken last year.

Last summer and fall, the Fresno County Sheriff's Department convened a meeting of sheriff's officials from Kern, Kings, Tulare, Madera, Merced and Mariposa counties.

"We always learn from our disasters in California and we're getting better all the time," said Lt. Joseph Blohm of the Fresno County Sheriff's Department.