

Article written earlier this week by hurricane author Rick Schwartz

Remembering the Flood of 1985

November 5, 2010, marks the 25th anniversary of the "Great Election Day Flood" of 1985. It ranks among the most destructive natural disasters to affect West Virginia and northwestern Virginia. The event is an example of how severe weather indirectly related to a hurricane can pound the Mid-Atlantic region.

Hurricane Juan made landfall along the central Gulf Coast and tracked several hundred miles west of the Middle Atlantic states on October 31 and November 1. An offshoot developed over North Carolina and moved through Virginia and Maryland on November 2. A more vigorous low pressure system traveled from Florida to western Maryland from November 3-5. It brought a deluge to part of the Mid-Atlantic region on November 4-5. Double digit rainfall pelted in some sections of West Virginia and northwestern Virginia, along with widespread areas of 5 to 10 inches of rain, which fell on previously saturated ground.

West Virginia experienced epic flooding. At least 40 people died. The National Weather Service reported:

"Along many rivers and streams, flooding of 100 to 500 year flood level frequencies occurred. Records were established in the headwaters of the Monongahela and Potomac basins, as well as along the Greenbrier and Little Kanawha rivers. Records were also set on the Tygart, West Fork and Cheat rivers. The most heavily damaged towns were Parsons, Rowlesburg, Albright, Petersburg, Franklin and Moorefield.

"A total of 29 counties were included in a disaster declaration. Floodwaters washed away entire towns, roads and bridges. Of the nearly 9,000 homes affected, 4,000 were completely destroyed. Total damage estimations were in excess of \$577 million."

The Potomac River crested at 54 feet in Paw Paw, West Virginia (flood stage 25 feet). It reached 34 feet in Harpers Ferry, West Virginia (flood stage 18 feet).

The Cheat, Tygart and West Fork rivers flowing north out of West Virginia into Pennsylvania spread abundant ruin. Flooding devastated the Pennsylvania counties of Somerset, Allegheny, Westmoreland, Washington, Fayette and Green.

In Virginia, the James, Roanoke and other rivers went on sprees. At

Lynchburg, the James climbed to 35 feet (flood stage 18 feet), shattering the 28 foot crest wrought by Hurricane Camille in 1969. The river crested in Richmond at 30.8 feet, above a flood stage of 9 feet.

The Roanoke River at Roanoke crested at 23.4 feet, eclipsing the previous standard of 19.6 feet set by Hurricane Agnes in 1972. About 3,000 homes and 100 businesses were damaged or destroyed.

In Rockingham County, located in northwestern Virginia, floodwaters inundated 4,000 homes and 350 farms and closed 95 percent of the primary and secondary roads.

When the downpours ended, 40 counties in Virginia were declared federal disaster areas.

Flooding wasn't only the result of heavy rain. Persistent gales generated the worst rise in many years along the Chesapeake Bay and some of its tidal tributaries.

"Along the western shore of the Chesapeake Bay and its tributaries in southern Maryland," wrote Joseph Moyer, the Maryland state climatologist, "strong easterly winds combined with storm tides reaching 4 to 6 feet above normal, accompanied by waves of 6 to 8 feet, resulted in extensive damage to piers and sea walls, as well as to buildings and roads. Considerable beach and soil erosion was reported. Water levels were reported as the highest since the Hurricane of August 1933."

"Juan Big Storm," Patrick Michaels, Virginia's state climatologist called it. Well, at least Juan's offshoot was one big storm.

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