

Storm downs trees across Richmond area, knocks out power to 70,000.





KEVIN MORLEY/TIMES-DISPATCH

Posted: Wednesday, July 20, 2016 6:00 am

By DENVER PRATT AND MICHAEL PAUL WILLIAMS Richmond Times-Dispatch

As she sat in her home in the Willow Oaks area of South Richmond, Mary Staley thought she was waiting out just another storm.

“I was shocked when I walked out the door and there was this much damage,” she said, as tree service employees worked to extract a tree from her roof at the rear of her home on Westchester Road.

She said she had heard something hit her roof, but it wasn’t that loud.

“It looks like a war zone out here, doesn’t it?” asked Staley, a 57-year resident of the neighborhood.

The buzz of chain saws and the drone of generators competed Tuesday evening in the aftermath of a fierce summer storm whose 70-mph winds sheared off treetops and brought trunks down in yards or atop homes. It also dropped walnut-size hail and knocked out power to more than 70,000 customers in the Richmond and Tri-Cities areas.

Some of the heaviest damage was reported in the city’s Stratford Hills area. Traffic on Forest Hill Avenue was backed up from Rettig Road near Willow Oaks Country Club to the Stratford Hills Shopping Center as a result of downed trees and power lines. Police directed motorists around still-live wires, turning Forest Hill into a two-lane road at that point.

“The storm couldn’t have hit at a worse time because it was rush-hour traffic. Then we got water blocking the road, trees blocking the road, wires blocking the road, things really got jammed up,” said Richmond Fire Marshal David Creasy.

Firefighters rescued a person who was trapped in their vehicle after a tree fell on it near Meridale and Cherokee roads in Stratford Hills about 5 p.m. The person was not injured, Creasy said. The tree had fallen primarily on the engine.

Nearby, a house fire in the 7700 block of Marilea Road likely was caused by the storm, he said. Fire officials think the blaze was related to lightning. The fire started underneath the house and worked its way into the walls and attic.

No injuries were reported, but the occupants will likely be displaced, Creasy said.

City Councilwoman Kathy C. Graziano, who lives on Westchester Road in Willow Oaks, surveyed the damage in a neighbor's yard and the massive willow oak branches lying in her own backyard.

"We were just lucky nothing hit the house," she said, though her grandchildren's play set wasn't so fortunate.

"They're really pretty when they're up," she said as she examined a felled willow oak that straddled the property line. "Not when they're down."

Stratford Butterworth was sitting in his Westchester Road house waiting for the storm to pass when "I heard something that was not thunder or lightning." A hickory tree toppled onto the rear porch of the home Butterworth has lived in, off and on, since his parents built it in 1960.

As he drove home from work, Aaron Fowler had a lot of time to build up a sense of dread of what he might find when he arrived at his Stratford Hills home.

"It was awful," he said. "It was like sheets of rain." It took home him 45 minutes to make the 4-mile trip, only to find a fallen tree wedged on the chimney of his home on Montauk Drive.

Three people on eastbound Interstate 64 near mile-marker 168 in the Oilville area of Goochland County had trees fall on their vehicles, causing a 4-mile backup around 6 p.m.

The peak of the power outages appeared to be about 7:30 p.m., when almost 71,000 customers were without power in the Richmond and Tri-Cities area. At 11 p.m., about 45,000 customers were still without electricity, according to the Dominion Virginia Power website.

The utility said late Tuesday that crews would work overnight to restore power, and crews from elsewhere in Virginia will be in the Richmond area today to assist. The storm damage included downed wires, broken cross arms, and broken poles from trees and large branches. Dominion Virginia Power warned people to stay away from downed trees and downed wires, because they could be energized.

Jeff Orrock, a meteorologist with the National Weather Service in Wakefield, said the storm's strongest winds were 70 mph. The winds topped out at 58 mph at Richmond International Airport. The biggest hail reported — 1¼ inches in diameter — was in the Tuckahoe area. The storm produced 1,500 lightning strikes that hit the ground.

The storm moved in a southeastern direction at about 30 to 35 mph. It was in Louisa County about 3 p.m., Richmond about 4:30. It didn't pass out of Chesterfield County and Hopewell until about 6:30, Orrock said.

The most severe swath of the storm ran from Oilville across Chesterfield, then Hopewell and Prince George County.

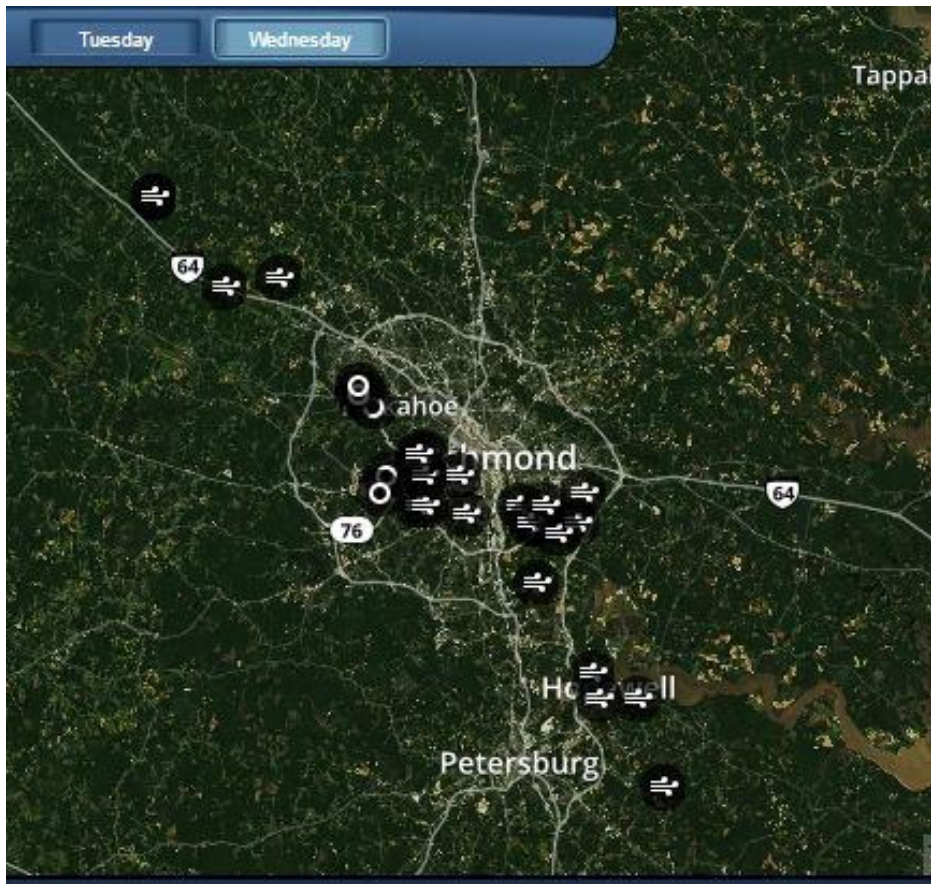
The combination of the hot weather and what's called an upper-level wave — a disturbance caused in the upper portion of the atmosphere — allowed for the production of large hail, strong winds and heavy rain, Orrock said.











Locations reporting Hail from the July 19th storm