FLOOD CALLS FOR BORDER-TO-BORDER RESPONSE BY HYGIENIC LAB

Catastrophe struck during the summer of 2008 in at least 80 Iowa counties, qualifying them for a Presidential Disaster Declaration, due mostly to record flooding. As the state’s public health and environmental laboratory, the University Hygienic Laboratory routinely serves all 99 Iowa counties. During the flood, the scope and number of services provided by UHL swelled as rivers overflowed their banks in historic proportions from the northernmost counties to Iowa’s southernmost tip.

Early requests for UHL to test drinking water came from Cerro Gordo County where the Winnebago River breached the levee system at Mason City on June 8. Record flooding forced the evacuation of residents and caused the closure of the local water treatment plant for at least four days. Access to safe drinking water was critical to the health of the residents and to the recovery of the town. Despite the closure of connecting roadways between the county and the lab, UHL received and rapidly tested samples from the water treatment plant and dispatched 200 testing kits for private wells to the Cerro Gordo County Public Health Department. Mason City officials recognized UHL’s "hard work, dedication and true compassion during the recent flooding" and also said that UHL “efforts lessened the impact of the damage to the community.”

As the floodwaters continued their southerly movement, Linn County braced for the Cedar River to crest at almost 20 feet above flood stage. On June 12, some 8,000 people were evacuated from Cedar Rapids. Water quality was again an issue. “When the department became overwhelmed with requests for private water analysis, you offered sample kits and water analysis, which allowed us to fulfill the public’s needs,” Marty Ralston, assistant director of Linn County Public Health, said about the county’s collaboration with UHL. “I know our staff has exchanged information on a whole host of issues,
including indoor and ambient air quality testing, water quality standards, sampling methodologies and results interpretation. You served as an information resource for our citizens, providing a place they could call for reliable, accurate information.”

The convergence downstream of the Iowa and Cedar rivers spelled disaster in Louisa County. On Friday, June 13, floodwaters caused the evacuation of Oakville and the shutdown of sewer systems in Fredonia.

Louisa County Public Health assisted private well owners by distributing 225 UHL flood testing kits during June and additional tests in the following months. The lab also assisted a local business with water quality testing and continued to routinely test the municipal water supplies of Oakville and Columbus Junction.

“We had a large amount of the county affected by seep water,” said Alana Poage, director of Louisa County Public Health. “For many residents, the water was deep enough that it covered their septic systems and their wells. So we were concerned about contamination.

“The Hygienic Laboratory was extremely helpful with testing the wells in the area. We did a random sampling of 50 wells. The lab was just excellent in providing the materials, getting the results to us and providing us the information in a way that we could use it.

“They also provided us with enteric test kits. We had a number of people complaining of gastrointestinal problems. These are people who were working in flood-affected areas. Some people thought it was a food-borne disease, but it wasn’t; it was Cryptosporidium, likely from the flood waters.”

Months after the floodwaters subsided, many counties continue on the road to recovery, a path made smoother by public health collaborations.

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