

# Tired and proud

BY LAUREL BEAGER  
Editor

Koochiching County Sheriff Brian Jespersen and Board Chairman Rob Ecklund Tuesday reflected on the activities of the community since a June 12 deluge brought historically high levels of local lakes and rivers. Ecklund said emergency preparedness training county staff have conducted in the past several years may at times have seemed excessive to some people, but paid off this week. “It’s absolutely critical we had that done because we were able to react,” he told The Journal. He and Jespersen agreed the Allied Radio Matrix for Emergency Response, known as ARMER, was worth the expense over which county commissioners have struggled for a couple years. ARMER is Minnesota’s shared public safety radio communication system and Jespersen said it allowed staff to speak clearly and uninterrupted to all corners of the county during the emergency when cell phones failed. “That was the best communications system we could have had,” Ecklund said. “The sheriff has said over and over again we couldn’t have done this without hav-

ing ARMER radio.” **‘It ain’t over yet’** Jespersen said the emergency operations center set up in the basement of the Law Enforcement Center is scaling back, sandbags were not being filled Monday and Tuesday, and volunteers aren’t being called at the moment. “If we get a real big downpour, that could change the game real quick,” he said. The emergency continues to be monitored, Jespersen said. County residents should not walk, play or swim in standing water resulting from floods to avoid coming in contact with potentially contaminated water. People should contact county officials for information about wells and cisterns that may have come into contact with flooded water, he said. “That’s being assessed,” he said of the risk of water contamination. Notices have been posted around County Road 46, between Ranier and city beaches. “If you are walking through it, or getting it on your hands, use soap and water and wash,” he said. “Use common sense.” For now, Jespersen said officials will wait for Rainy Lake to peak and hope for no large amounts of rainfall. “We will watch the areas we have some concern about

and if it keeps coming up we may have to do some more sandbagging,” he said. A contingent of National Park Service staff and volunteers with a Canadian church group remains in the community to assist, he said. **Volunteers** Jespersen and Ecklund praised the community’s response to the emergency. “In time of need people band together and that’s what happened here,” Jespersen said, adding National Guard soldiers said they were impressed by the effort of the local people. “The local community kept them working because they didn’t have to send half their guys to fill sandbags,” he said. “We kept them going.” The majority of local folks who volunteered hours filling sandbags did so out of concern for their neighbors experiencing property damage and the resource so many love, both men agreed. Ecklund said the sandbagging efforts did more than protect property. “It’s a tremendous community bonding process and brought a lot of people together that maybe would have never met otherwise,” he said. “It was amazing what happened here,” Jespersen said.

of the neighbor-helping-neighbor effort happening during the natural disaster. “I’ve seen unbelievably impressive work across the state,” he said. “The most

impressive thing here is the volunteers. These people are helping out of the sense of community and for their fellow citizens. People should really see this.”

address the various amounts of needs. We are ready to help this community – our neighbors. It’s what we do.” And they did it well. Rob Trompeter whose home on Rainy Lake has seen its share of water and volunteers over the past week, said when the dozens of community members offering their help were getting tired, it was a welcome sight to see the National Guard take over. “It just took my breath away,” the owner of Borderland Jewelry said. Muddy and exhausted, like many of his neighbors, Trompeter said efforts to build up sandbag dikes were getting quickly outpaced by rising waters. “My neighbor was taken to the hospital and treated for exhaustion,” he said. “We just couldn’t keep up anymore.”

Luckily, the residents of County Road 46 received relief when a few dozen soldiers arrived at their homes with pallets of sandbags and a fresh wave of energy. “(The operation) was so well organized and they did such a wonderful job for us,” Trompeter said of the soldiers. “They were able to help build up my sea wall another 4 feet. The community effort makes me proud to be from International Falls and the Guards make me proud to be an American.”

Koochiching County Sheriff Brian Jespersen agreed. “The (sandbag) dike the Guard built on County Road 46 is amazing,” he said. “Locally, there is no way we could have done that by ourselves...We just don’t have that kind of manpower. They’re impressive to watch. Without them here, this wouldn’t have happened.” While the sheriff noted efforts by local volunteers have gone above and beyond what he ever imagined, he said there just wasn’t enough people to keep up with Mother Nature. “Everyone was getting worn out,” he said, admitting he never thought he’d see the day where he would need to summon the National Guard. “When I heard the lake could rise another 15 inches or so, I knew we couldn’t handle it,” he said. “We’d used up our local resources. It was time to bring them in.” **Working together** Community volunteers may have been tired, but

## FLOOD

► continued from A1

He again reiterated no lives have been lost or major injuries sustained as a result of the flooding or relief efforts. “It could be worse (here),” he said noting reports of injuries, mud slides and other flood damage occurring elsewhere in the state. “The good news,” the weary-looking sheriff said with a smile, “the blueberry crop should be good.” **River, lake levels** Meanwhile, officials discussed a release issued Monday by the International Rainy-Lake of the Woods Board of Control Water Levels Committee reporting the level of the upper Rainy River, between the outlet of Rainy Lake and the International Falls-Fort Frances dam has risen close to elevation of the overflow spillway in the center of the dam. This spillway is designed to safely pass additional flow at high lake levels. The rate of flow over the spillway will increase gradually as the lake level rises, the release said. Lee Grim, a member of the committee, told The Journal the flow over the spillway will help water pass through the system. “It’s not a bad thing,” Grim said. “It went over the top in 1950 — and we’re several feet away from that. People shouldn’t think the dam will fail.” Lori Lyman, Boise public affairs manager, said mill officials “continue to closely monitor the tailrace elevation level at the dam and it continues to decline.” Grim said Tuesday Namanakan Lake has peaked and the level is coming down, the level of Basswood Lake is decreasing and the Vermillion River level is coming down. However, he said the

Turtle and Seine rivers in Ontario are not decreasing and are rising, and that’s not good. “It all depends on rain,” Grim said. “We will just wait and watch for the water or the lack of it coming out of the sky.” **Other issues** As of Tuesday morning, prior to the rainfall, Jespersen said volunteers would not be needed to fill sandbags at this point and 12,000 bags are in reserve. Ecklund said earlier in the day sandbags may be picked up from 8-9 a.m. and noon to 1 p.m. at Kerry Park each day, until further notice. If county residents need larger quantities, they are asked to call the Koochiching County Law Enforcement Center dispatch at 218-283-4416 to coordinate loading. Sandbags are not to be used to protect docks and boathouses; they are to be used to protect homes, cabins, and businesses from water damage, Ecklund said. The group said City Beach has been closed until further notice because of flooding there. County Environmental Services Director Dale Olson said he is providing information to residents about wells and cisterns impacted by flood water. (See a story from the county on Page 3A). Lindsy Barnhart, county Health and Human Services, said she has met with Ranier residents to discuss well and cistern issues. Ranier Mayor Dennis Wagner reported it is very dangerous and almost impossible to boat beneath the Ranier lift bridge. “It’s a serious deal,” he said. He urged people to watch carefully for debris floating just under the surface of the water on Rainy Lake and Rainy River. **Peace Pull** The annual Peace Pull, scheduled this year for

July 2, has been changed. The International Falls City Council will meet in special meeting at 4:30 p.m. Wednesday to discuss the changes. International Falls Chamber of Commerce Director Faye Whitbeck said an international peace party will take place, with Fort Frances folks coming to the James Oberstar Complex off Highway 11 East for the entertainment. Randy Thoms, B-93 news director in Fort Frances, reported Tuesday morning the Fort Frances fire chief tested the current in the Rainy River where a rope is annually stretched between the shores for the annual tug of war between the sister cities. Thoms said the current was significant and the chief recommended the actual pull be canceled or rescheduled. In addition, he said the July 1 Canada Day fireworks are canceled and may be rescheduled because the area from which the fireworks are launched is underwater. Dragonboat races on the river planned as part of the local independence day celebrations on both sides of the border were earlier postponed. “The fire chief said we’re safe, but we’re not out of the woods,” reported Thoms. Whitbeck said the gates at the complex for the international peace party will open at 4 p.m. for a picnic and performance by Darcy Schultz dancers. A kiddie pull on land for kids ages 5-13 will take the place of the other canceled tugs. “The ceremony will go on and there may be a tongue-in-cheek awarding to the river — the river won this year,” Whitbeck said. “We are making the best of it. There will be a mixing of folks on both sides who don’t want to let go of things planned and still have that bond.”

## FRANKEN

► continued from A1

The senator’s focus drifted back to his amazement

## DUTY

► continued from A1

state of emergency and activated the Minnesota National Guard. Koochiching is among 35 Minnesota counties included in the declaration. Sgt. First Class Troy Smith said the activation gave soldiers a 12-hour notice to pack their bags and report to the Cloquet Armory. “Activation for us was in support of the local emergency management,” Smith said Friday of the flooding along area lakes and rivers. “Two days ago, these guys were in their personal lives with their kids, jobs, and school and within 12 hours they were in the armory and they’re here now, ready to work.” While Overton left his wife and two young children, some of his comrades had to make more drastic arrangements. Nate Weichmann is missing out on some fun in the sun. The 21-year-old private said he was scheduled to leave for Cancun Friday for a week-long family vacation when he got the call. “Everyone agreed, ‘it’s your job, you gotta do what you gotta do,’” Weichmann said of missing his family’s annual event. When he realized he was going to have to miss his vacation because of the orders, he said he didn’t have much of an internal debate about it: He was going to International Falls. “I didn’t even know International Falls existed before I got up here,” the Minneapolis native said of receiving orders to help with the local flood relief. Weichmann hasn’t talked to his family since they’ve arrived in Cancun, but said he knows they’re sharing one experience this week. “We’re both playing in the sand,” he said. “At least I got that, got some happy thoughts going on.” **Active duty** Upon arrival Thursday, soldiers put on their game face and got right down to business. “If they need us filling sandbags, we’ll do that, if they need us on the line, we’ll go there,” Smith said Friday as duties were getting underway. “We’ve got the equipment and the personnel to

**Do you have one of the following health insurance providers?**  
**Blue Cross Blue Shield of Minnesota**  
**Medica • HealthPartners® • Preferred One**  
**SilverSneakers® • Silver & Fit®**

*If your answer is yes, you may be eligible for a fitness rewards program that pays you back for working out or a free membership if you are eligible for either the SilverSneakers or Silver & Fit programs. Bring your insurance card into Stride during staffed hours (8am-6pm M-F) to find out which option is available for you!*

**FEDERAL EMPLOYEES**  
You are also eligible for a reduced rate membership through the Blue Cross Blue Shield Federal Employees Program. Ask us for details!

  
**Stride**  
**FITNESS & HEALTH**  
Located at 10 Shorewood Dr. International Falls, Minnesota  
Phone: 218.285.2901

**SHA SHA**  
**Summer Splash**  
**Saturday, June 28<sup>th</sup>**  
**DJ BRIAN GLAD**  
**Starts at 8:30**  
**\*We are open and accessible by land and water!\***  
**\*Adequate of dock space!\***

  
**Happy Hour 8:30-9:30 • \$1 OFF Teas**  
**SHA SHA**  
**RESORT**  
*On Rainy*  
**286-3241**  
**East on Hwy. 11**  
**www.shashaonrainylake.com**  


  
**Rain or Shine!**  
  
**Kitchen Open**