

Severe Weather Week includes county-wide tornado drill next week

By Jan Schultz

The Imperial Republican

Spring arrived on Wednesday this week, but attention has quickly turned to severe weather that often hits Nebraska in March and April.

Paul Kunnemann, Chase County's Emergency Manager, said it's hard to tell what the upcoming severe weather season will bring. Last year, there were no major tornado concerns in the area; rather, lightning was a big problem.

"We had a lot of lightning strikes. We chased a lot of those and really spent our time helping the fire departments," Kunnemann said.

Many of those lightning strikes, coupled with severe drought, spawned grass fires that were a constant problem for firefighters throughout the county in 2012.

Chase County will take part in the Nebraska Weather Service's annual tornado drill next Wednesday, March 27, during Severe Weather Awareness Week, March 25-29.

Kunnemann said a tornado watch will be issued about 9 a.m. that morning, with the sirens going off for the drill about 9:30 a.m.

All of the sirens in Imperial, Wauneta, Enders and Champion will be sounded at the same time, coordinated through the emergency alert system at the Chase County Courthouse, Kunnemann said.

The drill provides an opportunity to listen for the difference in the tornado siren tone, as well as for families to make plans for shelter if a tornado or other severe weather require it.

Kunnemann reminds residents that there are several public shelters in Imperial that can be accessed during the day if severe weather threatens and people can't get home.

Those include the city office, public library, courthouse and school.

He also reminds county residents that the CodeRed emergency alert system is in use here, and was just renewed for a five-year period.

Residents who would like to have the alert notification and are not on the system now can call the Chase County Roads Department office, 308-882-7520, or sign up online at the county's website: www.co.chase.ne.us

During the past year, Kunnemann noted the old Thunderbolt siren at the courthouse was retired and replaced with a new one the city and county purchased together.

He said the newly-installed siren, should the power go out during a storm, is backed up by a generator, so could continue to be sounded if needed.

Time will tell how much the sirens will be needed this season.

At their annual meeting earlier this month with National Weather Service staff from North Platte, local responders were told forecasts for this area indicate above normal precipitation during March, April and May.

But, then it's supposed to be dry again after that, Kunnemann said.

Kunnemann has the help of 10 spotters throughout the county who get out and watch the skies when threatening weather is approaching.

They include:

Imperial area—Cory Schuller, Duane Dreiling, Earl Loop, Joe Weiss, Kelsey Weiss and Josh Burke.

Wauneta area—Bill Bischoff and Bobby Goings.

Champion area—Nate Jenkins.

Lamar area—Mark Berry.

Nebraska not immune from severe weather in 2012

While Chase County was fairly quiet for tornadoes and hail last year, other parts of Nebraska were not.

In fact, 44 tornadoes were reported last year, which is just nine less than the 30-year average of 53.

There were no tornado deaths last year, but five people sustained injuries in the North Platte area due to an April 14 storm. Lincoln County also recorded the strongest tornado, an EF3, on March 18 near North Platte.

April 2012 proved to be the most active month in Nebraska for tornadoes with 25. That is the highest April total ever since records began in 1950.

The earliest tornadoes in 2012 hit on Feb. 28, one near Stapleton and another near Greeley.

Sept. 30 recorded the latest one near Arnold in Custer County.

Other severe weather also made the news.

Hail the size of softballs hit Hastings and Coleridge in May 2012, while wind gusts over 80 mph were recorded in Blair that month, as well.

Did you know?

- The average tornado moves from southwest to northeast, but they have been known to move in any direction. Its average forward speed is 35 - 45 mph, but may vary from nearly stationary to 70 mph. Tornadoes are most likely to occur between 3 & 9 p.m., but have been reported at all hours of the day or night.
 - Lightning can occur from cloud-to-cloud, within a cloud, cloud-to-ground or cloud-to-air.
 - A downburst is a small area of rapidly descending air beneath a thunderstorm. Once this air hits the ground, it spreads out, causing potentially damaging straight-line winds. Downbursts present an extreme danger to aviation.
 - Large hail stones can fall at speeds greater than 100 miles per hour.
 - The largest hailstone ever recorded in the United States fell in Vivian, So. Dak., on July 23, 2010. This hailstone had an eight-inch diameter and weighed 1.94 lbs.