

How do Lancaster County residents get warned about potential flooding? [Lancaster Watchdog]



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Louis Binino, of Mount Joy, looks at his vehicle, far left, that became stranded in high water along Route 772 near Barbara Street in Mount Joy Borough on Wednesday, July 25, 2018. Binino was driving through the high water from Little Chiques Creek around 6 a.m. when he said his vehicle started to float. Binino waded through the water to safety after climbing out the window of the vehicle.

BLAINE SHAHAN | Staff Photographer

Two weeks ago, dozens of water rescues were reported in northwest Lancaster County, triggered by a particularly wet start to the month. On July 14, Mount Joy Borough was hit the hardest, receiving more than 7 inches of rainfall.

Heavy rain that day even forced the brief closure of a portion of Route 30 and a section of 283.

The flooding made Randy Gockley curious.

Gockley, who retired as director of the Lancaster County Emergency Management Agency in 2018, decided to check a rain gauge close to his home in Ephrata. He pulled up a website he had often consulted during his time working for the county to see what the gauge recorded.

Gockley was surprised to see the Ephrata gauge, which is on Cocalico Creek, was no longer spitting out data. He told The Watchdog the gauges had previously been used by the National Weather Service to help the agency decide when to issue alerts about potential flooding.

The county's Contrail® system, the website Gockley used to check on the Ephrata gauge, shows at least 13 areas where the county uses tools to track rain accumulation and wind direction, among other things. At least six locations appear to update irregularly or are completely inactive.

Though the site shows that the Ephrata gauge updates every couple of hours, it is completely inactive on the National Water Prediction Service website. A spokesperson for the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, which manages the site, said the agency could not share detailed information about the inactive gauges because they do not manage them.

Commissioner Josh Parsons said the Contrail® website relies on an old system of gauges that were installed years ago that local officials generally no longer use. He disputed Gockley's assertion that the system was used to push out weather alerts, taking a jab at LNP | LancasterOnline when asked about the system.

“They have nothing to do with emergency reporting, and I’m sure that’s what (LNP) is going to allege that they somehow have to do with flood reporting or emergency reporting. They don’t,” Parsons said. “They’re simply for data purposes, historical data purposes.”

Parsons said it’s “questionable” whether the Contrail® website should be published anymore, noting it was originally shared with the public for transparency purposes. He said officials will likely add the information collected by the gauges to a new website created about a year ago – the [county’s flood risk dashboard](#) – that mostly shares data collected at county waterways by systems managed by the U.S. Geological Survey, a federal mapping agency.

USGS currently operates seven rain and stream gauges installed along Chiques Creek, Pequea Creek, Big Spring Run, and the Susquehanna and Conestoga rivers. Parsons described the USGS gauges as being more advanced than the system the county has operated on its own.

In an email, county commissioners spokesperson Michael Fitzpatrick reiterated that the Contrail® system was never used to issue alerts to emergency responders. Instead, he said the data collected is used to create “historical records” for trend analysis between stream height and rainfall totals. Fitzpatrick encouraged residents to sign up for the county’s emergency alert system ([lanc.news/LancAlert](#)), which includes warnings from the National Weather Service.



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Where alerts come from

Craig Evanego, a hydrologist for the National Weather Service in State College, said the agency uses any information it can get, such as data from the Contrail® system, to inform the broader community about the potential for flooding.

All the information it collects informs when NWS issues flash flood alerts, like the three warnings that were sent to county residents on July 14 through the county's alert system.

Even if some county gauges are not fully operational, Evanego said there are enough resources in place from the federal government down to individual weather watchers to help the NWS determine when to issue warnings.

"If one piece of that (system) goes missing for a little bit, we have a lot of backup sources that we can still monitor rainfall and flooding potential," Evanego said. "All of that is vital for us maintaining our monitoring of flash flood risk."

Rain and stream gauges are what Evanego calls "ground truth," because those tools offer real-time data from a specific location. The National Weather Service also uses radars that can estimate rainfall totals. Lancaster County is covered by radars from State College, northern Virginia and New Jersey.

Mark Beaver, supervisory hydrologic technician for the USGS' Pennsylvania Water Science Center, said the agency's gauges supply real-time data to the National Weather Service. He said the sensors transmit information every hour and will send data out more frequently when rainfall or stream levels reach a higher threshold, so officials can monitor flooding more closely.

Why so many floods this summer?

This summer has been particularly wet in Lancaster County. Evanego attributed the frequent flooding to a pattern of "warm, very humid air masses" that produced heavier downpours. Repeated storms make flooding more likely to happen, he noted.

"Once you have a flash flood event, you're more prone to having another one... The ground's wet, the stream's running high, so that tends to happen," Evanego said. "It seems like a domino effect."

People should be mindful of the type of alerts they're receiving when flooding does occur. Evanego said a flood watch is more of a "heads up" sent out several hours in advance of problems potentially developing. A

warning signals that flooding is imminent.

The alerts sent on July 14, for example, provided links to more information about what areas are most at risk.

The Pennsylvania Emergency Management Agency manages its own system of rain and stream gauges throughout the state. Jeff Jumper, the agency's communications director, said the state is currently working with Penn State University to install new, state-of-the-art gauges that also track temperature, wind direction and humidity levels.

The state recently installed a new gauge in Salunga at Penn State's Ag Research and Extension Center.

The National Weather Service also relies on the public for data. Backyard rain gauges and photographs, for example, can be shared with the agency's meteorologists (Go to lanc.news/Skywarn for more information).

Evanego said the agency monitors all channels of information 24/7 to determine when and how to issue flood alerts.

See the water

The Susquehanna River Basin Commission is in charge of a set of cameras that overlook the Conestoga River in Earl Township, Cocalico Creek in Ephrata and Chiques Creek north of Manheim. A camera is also fixed on the Susquehanna River in Dauphin County.

The cameras, available to view on Lancaster County's flood risk dashboard, refresh every 10 minutes. Ben Pratt, the commission's water resources engineer, said the cameras were installed nearly 10 years ago.



A screenshot from the Susquehanna River Basin Commission's camera that overlooks Cocalico Creek in Ephrata Borough on Friday, July 25, 2025.

Pratt said the cameras have proven to be a valuable tool for local communities. The Chiques Creek camera was intentionally placed upstream from Manheim, he said, to ensure residents and emergency personnel have advanced warning of a flooding event.

Pratt said flash flooding is extremely unpredictable, so people need to be mindful of weather forecasts whenever they can, especially in small communities. Rainfall tends to be so localized, he said, that a storm could be mild in one area yet "catastrophic" in the next town over.

"People in Harrisburg are going to know 48 hours out if the (Susquehanna) River is going to flood," Pratt said, noting the systems in place are very good at predicting when the major river could flood.

Smaller streams are harder to predict.

"People in Mount Joy maybe had 15 minutes to know they had to get out when they needed to get out," Pratt said.

As for the Contrail® system, Gockley insisted to The Watchdog that the county's gauges were used in the past to help issue flooding alerts. And if some of those gauges are offline or not delivering data to NWS, he asked, why not fix them so forecasters and local officials alike have more information available to them?

Notice any problems?

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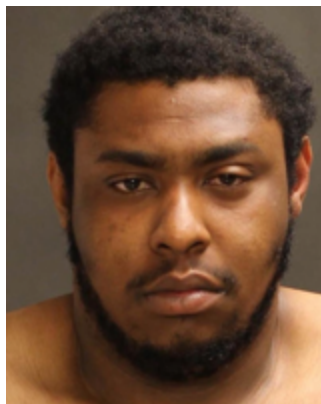
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