

Flood cause sought; firm cites canals

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SHELTER CREEK — When Hurricane Diana careened ashore this month, most people expected a lot of damage from flooding. But many residents in this small community in northern Pender County didn't expect the kind of flooding that occurred here two days after the hurricane had passed.

As many as 27 families and farms, along with large sections of N.C. 53, became inundated with chest-high water days after the storm had passed. Emergency officials and land management engineers admitted they were baffled by the flood.

Most blamed the unheard-of 18 inches of rain that fell in two days. But officials could not explain why the water didn't drain away faster than it did.

Some residents have their doubts that Shelter Creek and the Northeast Cape Fear River were the problem. Steve Holland, who owns a restaurant business on N.C. 53 that overlooks Shelter Creek, said he thought it strange to see flood waters rushing over the road and spilling into the creek from the landward side.

Across the road from Holland's restaurant is more than 80,000 acres of timberland owned and managed by International Paper Co. Holland said many of his neighbors blame much of the flooding on drainage from the timber operation.

International Paper's property between N.C. 53 and the Angola Bay game preserve is mostly loam and sandy soils, which do not retain water efficiently.

Jack Van Surdam, International Paper Co.'s eastern region manager, said his company had already been "looking intensely at water control" in the area and had begun a

soil survey.

Hundreds of miles of canals were dug on the property, which is standard timber industry practice. The canals are designed to follow the natural drainage patterns of the region, Van Surdam said.

They were originally dug by Weyerhaeuser when that company owned the land, which it transferred to International a few months ago.

That natural flow pattern carries water from the Angola Bay area across N.C. 53 and into the yards and farms in the Shelter Creek vicinity.

The company follows a two- to three-year operation cycle of land clearing, replanting and harvesting to keep trees growing at the same rate they are cut, Van Surdam said.

Other techniques aimed at protecting wildlife and controlling water retention are routine in the area, Van Surdam said. No more than 500 acres can be "clear-cut" at one time without leaving a stand of trees for wildlife, he said. Blocks of trees left standing also help absorb ground water and control drainage.

Surrounding the entire timber operation is what Van Surdam calls an "aesthetic strip," a buffer zone of trees that protects the area's natural appearance along public roads and adjacent property until stands of replanted trees in the interior grow to maturity.

Drainage canals that channel water toward the ditches along N.C. 53 are usually stopped inside the buffer zone, Van Surdam said. Nevertheless, several canals opening directly onto the highway are visible from the road.

Van Surdam said he is convinced that the flooding at Shelter Creek was a once-in-a-generation occurrence. He said his company is well within land management guidelines.