

'Worst part has just begun'

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Pender County's new river monitoring station on the Northeast Cape Fear River at N.C. 53 was reporting water levels of 16.5 feet and rising quickly Friday afternoon.

But what had officials of the already hard-hit county worried is that the Chinquapin station in Duplin County, three days ahead of the N.C. 53 station, was reporting 22.5 feet, nearly 10 feet above flood stage and already the highest level recorded in more than 50 years.

"That's what's got us real scared," said

Eddie King, Pender County's assistant emergency management director. County officials expected the flood crest to hit sometime next week.

Across Eastern North Carolina, similar situations unfolded Friday, as officials and residents braced themselves for record-setting floodwaters.

"For many people in North Carolina, the worst part has just begun," said state public safety secretary Richard Moore.

Local tributaries, the source of much of the flooding which erupted Thursday, began to recede in most areas. But water levels of major

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waterways continued to rise.

Richard Anthony, chief meteorologist for the National Weather Service's office in Wilmington, said the rising rivers were a result of a cold front hovering over Southeastern North Carolina when Hurricane Floyd hit.

Although the trough helped partially deflect Floyd's eye from the mainland, it also pushed heavy rain bands all the way into central North Carolina and Southeastern Virginia, socking the regions with the same heavy rains that belted the coastline.

"And that rain has got to go somewhere," Mr. Anthony said. "So it's going to get worse before it gets better."

The flooding has virtually shut down the coastal plain east of Interstate 95.

Using boats and large trucks, National Guard troops were deployed in several counties to assist overwhelmed local rescue crews.

Capt. Martin Peele, a personnel officer for the N.C. Army National Guard, estimated the groups rescued at least 15 people trapped in their cars on flooded roads in New Hanover and Brunswick counties.

In Onslow County, Marine light amphibious vehicles from Camp Lejeune assisted county rescue crews in extricating people.

Thwarted by flooded roads, including the closing of I-40 in three places east of I-95, rescuers also were taking to the air, plucking stranded residents to safety in Jones and Duplin counties.

Also in Jones County, more than 1,500 hogs drowned and another 3,000 were marooned at M&R Livestock.

Pender County rescue crews spent Friday rushing to help people along the banks of the Northeast Cape Fear River, Black River, Burgaw Creek and other waterways suddenly finding themselves surrounded by surging waters.

"Most people around here know what to do when they're flooded," said Thomas Lindsay, a rescue technician with the Pender County Rescue Squad. "But we've got places getting flooded that have never been flooded before, where people don't know what to do, and that's the problem."

Even with many Columbus County neighborhoods already under water, John Moore, the county's emergency management director, said things weren't looking good for a quick end to the disaster situation.

"It's still rising," he said of the Lumber River, which already was at record-high levels.

Mr. Moore said emergency crews Friday were continuing to evacuate residents of Lake Waccamaw, Riegelwood, Acme and Delco.

In New Hanover County, officials were bracing themselves for the impending floodwaters while still dealing with areas flooded under Hurricane Floyd's first swipe at the county.

Wilmington Mayor Hamilton Hicks Jr. said he was worried about the surging floodwaters overwhelming the city's downtown Walnut Street substation, which pumps most of the wastewater from the Water Street area.

"That would really bring a stop to life as we know it," he said.

The National Guard also was gearing up for another round of rescues.

"We're getting ready for what we think might happen in a couple of days," Maj. Barney Barnhill said, "when all that water comes our way."