

Concern mounts over sewage, carcasses

By **BRIAN FEAGANS**

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WALLACE — Animal carcasses, hog waste and sewage festered in floodwaters here Monday as Melba Harrell came to grips with the looming public health crisis facing a community already soaked to the bone in pain.

"We're all so tired and want to go see our homes," she said, peering down at the pungent brown soup that has flooded her house along N.C. 41 between Wallace and Chinquapin. "But we've got all these dead animals floating around. What's going to happen to all these people's health when

they can go home?"

That's the question of the hour for state health and agriculture officials, who are scrambling to avert an epidemic as the carcasses of an estimated 2.4 million chickens, 100,000 hogs and 500,000 turkeys litter eastern North Carolina in the wake of Hurricane Floyd.

State officials are urging residents to get tetanus shots at clinics and county health offices and have ordered a dozen portable incinerators to burn as many dead animals as possible.

Roughly 20 inches of rain flushed the animals out of barns following Floyd and, in some cases, overwhelmed open-air pits

holding their waste.

Within days, flies will start hatching out of the carcasses and picking up bacteria such as salmonella and *E. coli* from waters thick with animal feces and sewage.

And that could mean disaster for people holed up on high ground or eating at outdoor feeding stations.

"It's a tremendous problem in that we've got lots of exposed feces, lots of flies on the way and lots of people eating outdoors," said Johanna Reese, a spokesman for the N.C. Division of Environmental Health.

Monday, the first two incinerators arrived at the McKoy Farm near New Bern

and a dry spot in Jones County to start burning up animals that can't be buried in the flooded eastern plain.

Additional 3,500-degree cookers, on order from Florida, should be in place around the region by week's end, said Andy Mixon, the state veterinarian.

Military trucks and four-wheel drive vehicles will be brought in to drag the animals out of barns and woods where the currents have penned them against trees. Federal inspectors have been called in from other states as well to assist North Carolina officials, who are also considering using inmate labor and private contrac-

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tors.

"We've got a big job ahead of us," Dr. Mixon said.

Ms. Reese said those relying on a well should boil their water. Residents of towns where municipal systems have been swamped should boil drinking water as well, she said.

Another potential disaster was shaping up Monday as a lagoon containing mercury-contaminated wastewater showed signs that it might crumble at the Holtrachem plant at Riegelwood.

Regional fire crews provided the elbow grease as National Guard helicopters brought in sandbags to buttress the north side of the open pit, which collects rainwater from the industrial site.

The plant, which makes chlorine gas for International Paper's pulp mill next door, used to employ a mercury-based system that has left the ground laced with the heavy metal, said Rick Shiver, head of the N.C. Division of Water Quality's Wilmington office.

It's unclear how much mercury, which can accumulate in fish and kill humans if ingested, is in the pit, he said. The plant is on the Cape Fear River below the drinking water intakes for Wilmington and Brunswick County so those supplies would not be affected in the event of a spill.

On Monday afternoon, Holtra-

Chem told the agency that rain expected this week, including possible downpours from Tropical Storm Harvey, could cause the earthen wall to fail on the north side of the lagoon. The wastewater level is a comfortable 2.5 feet from the lip of the lagoon but company officials fear the northern wall could erode, Mr. Shiver said.

Water Quality and officials from the N.C. Division of Land Quality plan to inspect the site today.

The state's main focus remains on hog country, however.

Rusty Meador, an officer with the N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission, had a grim look on his face Monday morning as he finished patrolling the Northeast community west of Wallace.

More than 160,000 turkeys had washed out of a nearby barn, he said while loading a motorboat onto a trailer. Dead cows, hogs and pets were also scattered about.

"I was watching turkeys go by by the grocery cart full," he said. "It's a mess."

Mr. Meador and Max Boliek of the state Alcohol and Law Enforcement division were trying to persuade the last remaining holdouts to evacuate the area because of the health risks. Some are living off food stashes in the second stories of their homes while others are staying in areas surrounded, but not covered, by water.

"It's only going to get worse," Mr. Boliek said. "I know people want to go home, but this is no place to live right now, even when it dries up."