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Red River rising faster than expected in ND, Minn.

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Mar 14, 5:43 PM (ET)

By DAVE KOLPACK

FARGO, N.D. (AP) - North Dakota and Minnesota residents who fought off record flooding a year ago in a frantic one-week sandbagging effort were jolted Sunday by the prospect of doing it over again.

The latest flood forecast from the National Weather Service shows the river rising to 38 feet in Fargo by week's end before leveling off. That would be 20 feet above flood stage and about 3 feet below last year's record. The crest had been expected later this month or early April.

The cities of Fargo and neighboring Moorhead, Minn., have been filling sandbags for the last two weeks, but hadn't planned to hand them out until later.

"It's go time now," Moorhead city manager Michael Redlinger said Sunday.

"We're gearing up," Fargo city administrator Pat Zavoral said. "It's last year all over again in terms of us having to do everything in the next six days."

Last week's unprecedented mild temperatures and persistent rainfall led to the accelerated crest forecast, weather service spokesman Greg Gust said Sunday.

"The spring snowmelt runoff has kicked into high gear across the southern half of the Red River basin," Gust said.

Last year the crest prediction was bumped up by more than three weeks because of March precipitation. Volunteers in the Fargo-Moorhead area worked around the clock to fill and stack about 6 million sandbags, many of which were delivered on flatbed trucks with police escorts.

"The timing of the predictions is almost identical to last year," Cass County Sheriff Paul Laney said Sunday. "The difference is we're not in the mad scramble to get organized. We're already organized."

Fargo and Moorhead officials had planned to begin daily flood briefings Saturday, and will instead start Monday by mapping out flood-fighting plans. The weather service also moved up its next flood forecast statement from Tuesday to Monday.

President Barack Obama on Sunday signed a federal disaster declaration for North Dakota, allowing state and local governments access to federal resources.

"We've got an awful lot of work to do in the next couple of days, but having been through it last year, everybody knows what to do," said Keith Berndt, Cass County engineer. "We just have to execute."

Tom Astrup, who lives near the river in north Fargo's North Oaks neighborhood, said he expects residents to react with both anxiety and determination.

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"The reality is you roll up your sleeves, you do it again," Astrup said Sunday. "At 38 feet, assuming that holds, we would all be fine. When you start getting up to 40 to 41 feet, that's when we start getting pretty nervous."

Last year the river was above flood stage for a record 61 days. It crested twice, first at 40.84 feet March 28, followed by a crest of 34 feet more than two weeks later. About 100 homes in the area were damaged, and thousands of people were evacuated.

Redlinger said news of the expected crest sparked interest in Moorhead's volunteer sandbag-making operations Sunday.

"I think people have really taken the request seriously to turn out to help," he said.

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