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**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

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## **Intensifying storm outruns lines of communication Saturday**

*Or why the sirens sounded after the main storm moved through Muscatine*

**MUSCATINE, Iowa** – Last Saturday’s weather event may have been a “once in a lifetime” event or just one of those that you hope doesn’t happen again any time soon. What we were left with after the water receded and the cleanup began was a greater understanding of the unpredictability of Mother Nature.

Thunderstorms like the one that dumped golf ball size hail and over three inches of rain on Muscatine in a 20 minute period are not uncommon at this time of year. It is the unpredictability of these storms that make life tough for even seasoned forecasters at the National Weather Service (NWS) as well as for emergency responders and even for the general public.



**Saturday, June 17, radar image as storm passed over Muscatine**

Weather forecasting is that one business where you can be wrong half the time and still keep your job. That is the nature of weather. It is ever changing. It can surprise you or it can disappoint you (if you are a weather chaser for instance). It can start your day with plentiful sunshine but turn it into an afternoon of stormy weather in a short period of time.

The NWS relies on trained weather spotters and the public throughout a region to relay information that substantiates and enhances what the meteorologist see on radar. Emergency services, such as MUSCOM, rely on the NWS to provide the information needed to determine when to activate the siren system.



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Last Saturday was a perfect example of what can happen when a rapidly developing weather system outruns the communication system. At 5:11 p.m. the NWS issued a severe thunderstorm warning for the area and upgraded the warning at 5:30 p.m. after 60 mph wind gusts and quarter size hail were reported in Nichols.

Two items to note here ... the storm was intensifying as it went through Nichols on its way to Muscatine ... and the wind speed and hail size did not meet the criteria for activating the sirens in Muscatine County. The standards for a severe thunderstorm are at least 70 mph winds and golf ball size hail.

Unconfirmed reports did indicate that by the time the gust front reached Muscatine, winds had strengthened to 70 mph or more. That wind speed was close to the 74 mph minimum for a Category 1 hurricane or the 73 mph minimum for an F1 tornado. Muscatine was spared another tornado (an EF2 tornado hit Muscatine in March) but the downburst winds did create a “gully washer” of a rain that resulted in flash flooding on the streets of Muscatine and water flowing into the basement of homes and businesses.

When the lines of communication finally caught up to the intensity of the storm, the NWS issued an upgraded warning which prompted the activation of the sirens in Muscatine County.

“People did question why the sirens went off after the storm went through and the best answer is that the storm outraced the lines of communication,” Kevin Jenison, communication manager pro tem for the City of Muscatine, said.

The NWS did upgrade their warning again at 5:55 p.m. after receiving updates from a weather spotter in Muscatine of 70 mph winds and golf ball size hail. By then, however, the main thrust of the storm had crossed the Mississippi River into Illinois.



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“One of the hardest things for the NWS to do is to make a decision on how high the winds are,” Jenison said. “They take reports from citizens and trained spotters, match them with what they see on the radar, and recalibrate the warnings with the additional reports.”

Muscatine Emergency Management officials added that the bottom line is that weather changes and, therefore, warnings are either upgraded or downgraded based on available information. And even weather has to meet certain criteria before the siren system is activated.

A NWS official said that the sirens are an outdoor warning of a weather event such as a tornado or severe thunderstorm, and that people should go inside and seek additional information. Having a battery operated radio tuned to a NWS station will help keep a resident informed about an event even if power goes out.

MUSCOM officials also stated that the sirens are activated for a tornado warning or for a severe thunderstorm where the winds are greater than 70 mph and hail is greater than golf ball size. The activation is based on information transmitted to Emergency Management personnel from the NWS. Once activated, the sirens sound throughout Muscatine County and citizens should seek immediate shelter regardless of whether the warning is for a tornado or a thunderstorm.

“Officials also wanted to make sure that people understand that there is just one tone,” Jenison said. “There is not a different tone for a tornado and there is no all-clear siren.”

If severe weather occurs do not call 911 unless it is an emergency. The quickest information on a storm can be obtained from tuning to a local television station or a local radio station.

“The number of calls during an event skyrockets and the dispatchers need to be available for emergencies and not answering weather conditions,” a MUSCOM official said.



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If a siren is not working or is malfunctioning, residents are asked to contact Muscatine Emergency Services at 563-264-6003 after the storm has passed. You can also relay information to the dispatch center at 563-263-9922 after the storm has passed.

More information on weather safety can be found at: <http://www.weather.gov/safety/>

[Radar Loop](#)