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Russell Recovers: Severe Destructive Storm Causes Widespread Damage

The City of Russell and Russell County experienced severe weather on the afternoon of May 19. A tornado warning preceded the storm that swept through the area, causing golf ball-sized hail and 82 mph wind gusts. The storm caused significant damage to homes, businesses, vehicles, and the City's electric distribution system. Three structures were completely leveled. At 3:28 PM on Sunday, the tornado sirens were activated in Russell, and the National Weather Service issued a warning for a confirmed tornado on the ground west of the city. Additional reports from law enforcement and storm spotters confirmed tornadoes between Gorham and Russell moving east toward the city.

The storm's impact was extensive, resulting in widespread power outages across the city. At approximately 3:38 PM, several areas lost power, followed by the rest of the service area at 4:00 PM. In response, the city activated its emergency operations plan, prioritizing life safety, property protection, public welfare, and the restoration of city services. City crews immediately began clearing streets of downed trees and other debris, restricting access to areas with downed power lines, conducting damage assessments, and working on restoring electric service and maintaining water and wastewater services.

Russell City Manager Jon Quinday reported no injuries. Electric service was restored to most of the city by midnight. However, approximately 116 Oakdale, Sunset, Margaret, and South Front Street customers remained without power until Monday afternoon, when the damage was repaired. Individual customers with property or meter box damage requiring the work of a licensed electrician will need to complete repairs before power can be restored to their properties.

The City of Russell received invaluable support through mutual aid coordinated by the Kansas Municipal Utilities. The cities of Garden City, Ellinwood, Hoisington, and Pratt sent electric linemen, equipment, and power poles to assist in rebuilding downed power lines and repairing damaged circuits. The Kansas Municipal Energy Agency (KMEA) also contributed their Manager of Field Services—a journeyman lineman with extensive experience in electrical substations - and a lineman to support the city's efforts. The city of Colby provided power poles to expedite service restoration. This collaboration expanded the city's resources from five linemen to seventeen.

City Manager Quinday praised the collective efforts, stating, "The response we received from these cities and KMEA is at the heart of what public power communities do and exemplifies the spirit of Kansas. I am proud of the work of all city crews and our mutual aid partners during and after Sunday's storm. Their dedication to restoring services and returning the community to normal is at the heart of public service."

At the May 21, 2024, city council meeting, the Mayor and City council expressed their gratitude and thanked city staff for everything they do daily in service to others, especially their exemplary response to major events such as Sunday's storm and subsequent recovery efforts.

City crews will continue cleaning up storm damage and repairing infrastructure over the next few weeks. Starting Thursday, May 23, city crews, with assistance from the Russell County Highway Department, will begin picking up trees and tree limbs of customers who have called the city clerk's office to get on the pickup list.

The National Weather Service of Wichita confirmed two tornado damage areas from Sunday's storms, one northwest of Russell and the other northeast of Wilson. Both tornadoes were rated EF-1. The tornado northwest of Russell had estimated peak winds of 98 mph and a path length of 1.7 miles.

A preliminary damage assessment by city staff indicates that 27 residences and 16 commercial properties received damage, ranging from multiple broken windows, damaged siding, and roofs to severe roof damage and two destroyed garages. These numbers do not include damage to public facilities – many of which were also damaged in the storm.

The National Weather Service sent a team to assess the damage within the City of Russell to determine whether a tornado, straight-line winds, or a combination caused the widespread damage throughout the community.

Thank you to everyone for your patience and those who extended a helping hand to others during and after this storm. Witnessing how our community comes together in times of need is truly inspiring.

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