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## SEASONAL KING TIDES CLOSE MARSHALLS SCHOOLS

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Flooding 'not usually destructive,' but still hinder road access

By Giff Johnson

SAIPAN, CNMI (Marianas Variety, Feb. 10) – Marshall Islands secondary schools were forced to close Wednesday and Thursday when king tides washed out portions of a seven-mile-long causeway, preventing school buses from transporting students to school.

"Education: Rolling with the Tides" is the definition of choice of Gary Elaisha, Director of Queen of Peace Schools on Kwajalein Atoll, in describing substantial tidal flooding on the Ebeye-Gugeegue causeway due to this week's king tides.

"The tides are dictating the school schedule," he said of conditions along the seven-mile-long causeway.

Tide levels have been building since Monday, with the highest tide of the year expected on Thursday and government officials alerting residents in this nation of low-lying atolls to be prepared for possible local flooding.

"We are currently in a weak to moderate La Nina phase, so sea levels and high tides are three-to-four inches above average," Steve Why, the government's senior advisor on climate change, said earlier this week. "Impacts will be magnified if we get a large swell during these times."

He said the Marshall Islands should "expect localized flooding during high tides on Feb. 7 through 10 in areas where it has happened before."

"These (floods) are not usually destructive inundation events, but rather produce one-to-two hours of inconvenience flooding either side of the peak tide," said a U.S. National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration report issued this week on the possibility of localized flooding in the Marshall Islands. "This means some debris on the road, some inundation of low lying coastal property, and flooding in some lagoon-facing houses."

Ebeye was the first island to report problems from the high tides this week. "We had to suspend school early Wednesday to beat the tides," said Elaisha. The buses for both Kwajalein High School and Fr. Hacker High School have suffered breakdowns this week after traveling through salt water on the tide-damaged causeway.

Kwajalein Atoll Local Government workers were out early Wednesday morning attempting temporary causeway improvements with heavy equipment, Elaisha said. But anticipated problems with Thursday's high tide caused both high schools to cancel classes Thursday.

The causeway linking the population center of Ebeye Island, home to about 12,000 people, with Gugueegue Island, seven miles to the north, was first constructed in the early 1990s. Two high schools and a few residences are located on Gugueegue. But the causeway was never paved or properly reinforced, resulting in ongoing damage from storm surf and high tides.

Kwajalein's Gugueegue causeway has been a boon and a bust for the community, offering a viable travel route to Gugueegue for school attendance, but causing serious maintenance challenges to expensive vehicles transporting students.

High tides of similar levels are also expected from February 21 to 23, and again March 8 through 11, according to Why.

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