

HARDIN TORNADO

Pounded by hail

Crops destroyed, houses damaged

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HARDIN — Conrad Yerger, a wheat and beet farmer who lives about three miles north of Hardin, joked Sunday that his house looked like the site of a Freeman standoff that turned ugly.

The vinyl siding on the west side of the 5-year-old house that Yerger built is riddled with holes, exposing the foam insulation underneath. Five west-side windows are boarded up, and hundreds of asphalt shingles have been stripped from the west roof.

Huge chips of vinyl siding littered Yerger's front yard. And what used to be a lush green hedge bordering his yard is now a scraggly row of bare twigs.

"It was like a mob shootout," Yerger said of the force that battered his home. He said he also lost most of his crops.

"It sounded like machine guns hitting the house," said Yerger's 13-year-old daughter, Amy. "It was scary."

But it wasn't bullets that caused the damage to Yerger's house and property. It was golfball-size chunks of hail hurled horizontally by westerly winds of 80 to 100 mph.

The winds and hail accompanied a tornado that touched down in the Hardin area at about 2:30 p.m. Saturday.

Amy said that from the basement door of her house she watched the hail puncture the windows and fly 25 feet through the air before bouncing off the walls and doors on the opposite side of the house.

"The walls of the house were shaking," she said.

Big Horn County Undersheriff Gary Liming said Sunday that no one had reported any storm-related injuries. The storm left plenty of other damage in its wake, however, snapping the tops off trees and downing several power and telephone lines.

The most severe damage appeared to have occurred north of Hardin and Interstate 90, where hail shattered the windows of homes and vehicles and virtually pummeled (More on Hail, Page 9A)



Above, Conrad Yerger examines a sugar beet field destroyed by hail. At left, golf ball-sized hail stones were most common. At right, Highway patrol officer Joe Campbell sat in his car Saturday during the storm.

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to stubs most of the crops in the area.

"It looks like someone took a lawnmower and just mowed the crops down," Liming said.

Yerger said he lost an estimated \$250,000 in gross income because of damaged crops. Though he actually incurred far more damage, Yerger said his insurance company will cover all but roughly that quarter of a million dollars.

"We were expecting a bumper crop this year with a bumper price," which his insurance company will not cover, Yerger said. "We busted our butts this year so we could take two days off for Big Horn Days. All we had to do was combine the fields."

Yerger's beets, for instance, were so healthy and abundant before the storm that no one could tell which way the farm rows ran. It's now pretty obvious that they run north and south.

"Now we'll have to recultivate the fields, ditch them and irrigate them," he said. "We'll have to start all over."

Less than a mile down the road from Yerger was Tom Watson, who, with the help of several neighbors, was busy raking up healthy green leaves from his

lawn. "Actually it's just more of a mess than anything," Watson said, noting that he lost four small windows across the back side of his house. The 16 fully bloomed peonies that grew along the south side of his house were torn to shreds, leaving limp pink-and-white petals strewn across the ground.

Watson's wife, Pat, said the hail that hit her house first punched holes in the window screens, shattered the glass, then ripped through the plastic window shades before hitting her legs.

"I was holding down the shade to keep things from blowing in, but the hail just broke through!" she said.

Montana Highway Patrolman Joe Campbell said being out in the storm was "one of the scariest things I've ever done in my life."

Campbell was traveling west on the interstate about three miles outside of Hardin when he saw a large, circular formation of dark clouds spinning fiercely overhead.

"I cinched my seatbelt tight with both hands because I was afraid my car would be picked up or rolled over," Campbell said. "I could feel the car getting lifted, like I was driving at 130 mph."

Campbell's car never left the ground, but tennis ball-size hail struck, denting the car and peppering the windshield with a dozen spider web-like cracks. The total estimated damage was roughly \$3,000 to \$4,000, Campbell said.

