



ANDY HEINTZ/Colby Free Press

Sean Casey with the Discovery Channel's "Storm Chasers" a heavy truck chassis to be able to film from the center of a tornado. The Storm Chasers team conducted exercises near Tuesday and Wednesday. Casey built the vehicle himself from Levant on Wednesday.

Tornado chasers make pitstop

Andy Heintz and Kevin Bottrell
Colby Free Press

About 160 storm chasers, including over 100 scientists from across the country, rolled into Colby on Tuesday as part of what Josh Wurman, president of the Center for Severe Weather Research, calls the biggest tornado study ever.

The Vortex 2 project includes a multiyear study some of the most dangerous storms on earth, he said.

The convoy of scientists, engineers, students and volunteers is going from state to state following severe weather outbreaks on the Great Plains. In particular, Vortex 2 is looking for supercell thunderstorms, giant rotating storms that can produce strong and damaging tornados.

"We are trying to understand how tornadoes form," said Wurman.

Glen Romine, a research scientist with the University of Illinois, said the group had come west from Salina and stopped in Colby for a day of rest. He said they chose Colby because it had enough hotel and motel rooms to house the project's staff.

Romine said the group is trying to determine the origin, evolution and structure of tornadoes that form from supercells. A supercell is a classification of thunderstorm whose inner clouds rotate, he said. They can move independent of prevailing winds and often produce hail, heavy rains and tornadoes.

Supercells can form anywhere in the world, but the right conditions occur most often on the Great Plains.

Romine said this is the first time that all of the instruments used to study tornadoes have been brought together in one place. The instruments include 10 mobile radars, including the Doppler on Wheels from the Center for Severe Weather Research, "smart radars" from the University of Colorado, radars from the University of Massachusetts, Texas Tech University and the Office of Naval Research, balloon-launching vans and several other instruments. The group even has unmanned aircraft, Romine said, but due to Federal Aviation Administration regulations, they can only be used over the Pawnee National Grasslands in eastern Colorado.

The group's ultimate goal is to increase accuracy in forecasts and warnings, giving people more time to get to shelter before a storm hits. The project team includes scientists



KEVIN BOTTRELL/Colby Free Press

Vortex 2, a country-spanning scientific study of tornados involving hundreds of scientists, stayed several nights in Colby. The study includes many different kinds of vehicle-mounted instruments such as wind speed monitors (above) and ground-based radar (below).



from universities, private and government organizations and international members from Italy, Netherlands, the United Kingdom, Canada and Australia. The National Science Foundation and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration have a contributed

over \$10 million to the effort.

Romine said the team hasn't found exactly the kind of storms they are looking for yet.

"We've collected some useful data sets, but we haven't gotten what we want yet," he said. "We're hopeful to get that data."

Wurman said planning for the project began in 2003. The group began tracking tornadoes and thunderstorms on May 10 and they will finish up around June 13, depending on storm activity. They will be tracking tornadoes again from May 10 to June 15 next year.

After the conclusion of the project, the scientists will return to their home institutions to study the data. Romine said so much data will be collected that it will take scientists more than 15 years to go through it all. Some discoveries will likely be made right away, he said, but the bulk of the work will take a long time.

Sean Casey and his team from the Discovery Channel's Storm Chasers also came to town. Casey designed and built his Tornado Intercept Vehicle, a heavy, armored truck meant to drive into the center of tornados. Casey is using the vehicle to film an Imax movie about tornados.

The Storm Chasers crew, while not affiliated with Vortex 2, often partners with the science team, Romine said, to help determine

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Academy makes move to half time

By Vera Sloan
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Despite reporting success the past five years, the Thomas County Academy charter school program will be cut to half time, serving one grade only, for the coming school year.

"When the academy received a start-up grant, the purpose was to bring information, resources, equipment and professional development to Colby Public Schools," said Principal Diana Wieland, who is also the curriculum director for the Colby School District.

"We found out (this spring) that it would be eighth grade only for the coming school year," said teacher Theresa Morgan.

The past five years, the program

has permitted seventh and eighth grade students to attend. There were 15 in the classroom last year, plus two virtual students.

The academy, based at Colby Middle School, used "project-based" team and individual learning, plus lots of technology, rather than a traditional classroom approach. It's designed to help students focus on multiple learning skills.

"The academy was never intended to be a financial benefit, nor a financial burden, to the school district," said Wieland. "Our initial commitment was a year in planning and four years of students, and now we are saying, how can we utilize a teacher and the school on a broader base? A lot

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New pension law may cost schools

By Kevin Bottrell
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A new law, signed by Gov. Mark Parkinson in May, may help save the state pension system some money at the expense of some teachers and administrators, districts and schools.

At its meeting Monday, the Colby School Board heard a report from District Business Manager Jo DeYoung on the law, which will do away with the formula the Kansas Public Employees Retirement System uses for retirees who are rehired by a district.

Under the old formula, a retired teacher, staff member or administrator could be hired back by a district at up to \$20,000 a year

and still draw their full pension. If a retired employee earned more than \$20,000, however, they could no longer draw any pension for the rest of the year. The process would start again the next year.

DeYoung said this rule led many districts to contract retirees with private firms or other agencies to get around the \$20,000 rule.

Under the new system, the district will be assessed a surcharge of 20 percent of the total salary on any retiree regardless of how much their salary is. There will no longer be a \$20,000 rule. The district is already required to pay a similar surcharge for employees receiving pensions from other retirement funds, such as federal

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Embark building goes over budget

By Andy Heintz
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Refurbishing a downtown building that will eventually be occupied by Embark Healthcare will be a lot more expensive than the business or the city expected, the Colby City Council learned Tuesday, but the firm still expects to be operating here by fall.

Michael Brouters, president and chief executive officer of Embark, a company that provides cross-country end-of-life services, told the council that renovating and refurbishing the first floor of the building will put his business \$80,000 over budget.

Architect Glen Strait of Strait

and Associates said that his construction crew had discovered the building was in advanced structural distress, with columns bowing and roof trusses deflecting.

Brouters told the council that the first employee his company will be hiring will be a call center supervisor. He said Embark will start hiring in mid-August. The company is raising private capital to help pay expenses for opening the operation in Colby, he said.

"We need more money to finish the building so we can go live by mid-September," said Brouters.

"We're spending more initially, but we will save money later," added Strait.

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Briefly

Educator to speak Friday

Joe Glassman, chair of the Kansas Regents Technical Education Authority, will talk at 1 p.m. Friday at the Colby High School auditorium as a part of the iConnect/iLearn Conference. Glassman will talk with the public, educators and business leaders about 21st century learning and employment. For information, call Teresa Morgan at 460-5057.

Singles, couples dance Friday

The Colby Singles and Couples Dance will be from 7:30-11:30 p.m. Friday at the Community Building in Colby, with music by Craig Stevens. For information, call Lue Duffey at (785) 855-2341.

Alumni to plan 2010 reunion

The planning committee for the 2010 Colby High School Alumni Reunion will meet at 5 p.m. Sunday at

the Vision Source conference room. All Colby High alumni are welcome. For information, call Amanda Wahlmeier at 460-9145 or Jada Tubbs at 460-9084.

Cemetery decorations must go

Families are asked to have all temporary grave decorations at Beulah Cemetery picked up by 5 p.m. Monday so mowing can resume, said Relda Galli, secretary of the Colby Cemetery District No. 1 board. For questions, call the caretakers at 462-3188.

District accepting applications

Friday is the deadline for state cost share money for water resource development and "nonpoint source" pollution-control projects through the Thomas County Conservation District. Eligible projects include terraces, diversions, livestock pipelines, water wells and septic systems. Cost share rate is at

least 60 percent, and the landowner limit will not exceed \$7,500 per project. For an application, stop by the district office at 915 E Walnut or go to www.thecoconservation.com. For information, call district Manager Debbie Potter at 462-7482, extension 303.

Food distribution Monday

Department of Agriculture commodity distribution will be from 1 to 2 p.m. Monday at the Retired Senior Volunteer Program office in the Senior Progress Center. Those who meet income requirements may receive the commodities, which include tuna, peanut butter, juice, green beans, mixed fruit and blackeyed peas. Distribution is first-come, first-served, but participants are asked not to arrive at the office more than a half hour in advance. For information, call the office at 462-6744.

Church cancels Tuesday meal

The "More Fun Together" senior singles potluck at the First Presbyterian Church for Tuesday has been cancelled. The July gathering will be announced closer to the date. For information, call Carol Rahn at 462-6342.

Red Cross offers water safety

The Thomas County Red Cross will offer a water safety instructor class from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday to Friday at the Thomas County Office Complex. The cost is \$180, including all materials. For information or to register, call the office at 462-7161.

