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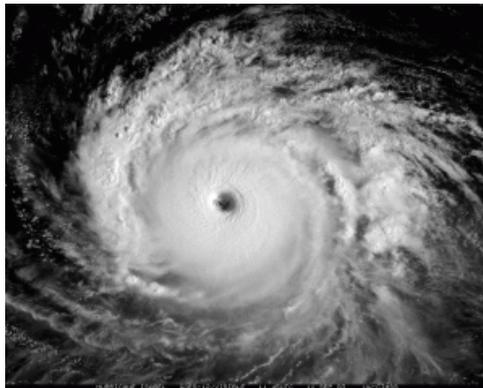
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Agency News

Plan for hurricanes before they strike

In August of this year, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) predicted an above normal, and possibly very active, 2013 Atlantic hurricane season. This year's season has already produced four named storms, and the peak of the season, from mid-August through October, has arrived. "Our confidence for an above-normal season is still high because the predicted atmospheric and oceanic conditions that are favorable for storm development have materialized," said Gerry Bell, Ph.D., lead seasonal hurricane forecaster at NOAA's Climate Prediction Center, a division of the National Weather Service. "Also, two of the four named storms to-date formed in the deep tropical Atlantic, which historically is an indicator of an active season," he added. NOAA's updated outlook calls for a 70 percent chance of an above-normal season.

In order to prepare for hurricanes and other weather emergencies, TDCJ's Office of Incident Management (OIM), in coordination with the Correctional Institutions Division and other agency divisions, oversees the agency's emergency preparedness and response activities. Although the agency's suc-



cess in responding to hurricanes and other severe weather events is primarily attributable to the dedicated front line employees who meet the challenge, adequate planning is important.

OIM trains agency staff on their response roles during emergencies and coordinates with groups throughout the agency to develop and update emergency response and continuity of operations plans. OIM also oversees some transport activities for the State Emergency Management Plan, which includes preparation and direction of a wide variety of transportation assets during emergencies. OIM also oversees all mitigation reports and activities for the agency; works to

identify potential hazards and threats to the agency; and develops mapping, modeling, and forecasting tools to lessen their effects.

OIM and representatives of various divisions and departments coordinate an agency-wide response that involves everything from the evacuation of offenders to the delivery of provisions to affected facilities. In the event of an approaching hurricane or tropical storm, OIM is responsible for monitoring its movements and keeping senior agency staff apprised of its strength and where it might make landfall. Even with the storm still days away, if TDCJ operations might be threatened, central command staff convenes in Huntsville where response plans for the specific, current storm begins. Throughout the state of emergency, OIM sends information to senior managers and works to control the flow of the command staff.

OIM's responsibilities don't end with the passing of the storm; the office coordinates with the Business and Finance Division in seeking reimbursement from the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) for storm-related costs incurred by TDCJ, costs

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which can run into the millions of dollars. During the last ten years, a number of hurricanes have struck the Texas Gulf Coast or shoreline to the north or south of Texas. Although several significantly impacted agency operations, public safety and the safety of the offender population were maintained through effective preparation and the extraordinary efforts of the dedicated men and women who serve the state of Texas as employees of the Texas Department of Criminal Justice. While the OIM and Emergency Command Center coordinate TDCJ's emergency response, it is front line staff that evacuates thousands of offenders, delivers emergency provisions like food and fuel, maintains security and supervision and successfully meets other logistical challenges. Despite the obstacles nature throws in their way, the employees of TDCJ rise to the occasion and ensure the agency's vital public safety mission is achieved.

Hurricane Rita

Planning ahead for sudden changes in the path of a hurricane proved critical in 2005 when Hurricane Rita was predicted to strike along the southern Gulf coast, leading to the evacuation of two state-operated prison facilities in Edinburg and the movement of all offenders from a privately-operated state jail in Raymondville a full 84 hours before the storm winds were expected to begin blowing along the coast. The hurricane made an unexpected last-minute shift to the north and made landfall near the Texas-Louisiana bor-

der. Within 15 hours, the orderly and secure relocation of more than 3,300 offenders and staff to safe facilities inland was complete. Hundreds of Texas Youth Commission offenders, TDCJ parolees and special needs offenders were also moved out of harm's way without incident.

TDCJ staff maintained public safety throughout Rita and its aftermath despite being personally impacted by the hurricane. At one point in the days following Rita, more than 350 displaced agency employees were staying in a shelter set up in an empty Texas Youth Commission facility adjacent to the three TDCJ units in Beaumont. Initially, a number of employees had been made virtual prisoners of the storm because they either couldn't get home from their duty posts or no longer had a place to go back to that was livable. Because gasoline was in short supply in the days immediately following the storm, volunteer bus drivers from the local school district drove TDCJ employees to and from work for two weeks. Wardens in affected units arranged for the American Red Cross and FEMA representatives to assist their employees. Post-trauma counseling was also made available.

In the years since Rita, TDCJ has continued to hone its hurricane response capabilities, first creating an Incident Manager position to oversee the agency's response activities, and then regularly staging emergency drills for both central and regional command staff members, focusing on improving commu-

nications between command staff and responders in the field.

Hurricanes Dolly, Gustav and Ike

The summer of 2008 brought three hurricanes and a tropical storm along the Texas Gulf Coast. In a span of three months, Hurricane Dolly, Tropical Storm Edouard, Hurricane Gustav and Hurricane Ike severely tested TDCJ's response capabilities when they struck agency facilities from Brownsville to Beaumont. The latter caused serious damage, but with careful planning and the efficient execution of the agency's disaster plan by thousands of agency employees, critical public safety functions were maintained.

In July, Hurricane Dolly caused power outages and some damage to private and state-operated prison facilities. Fortunately, Dolly weakened before making landfall in South Padre Island, but even this "weak" storm caused more than a billion dollars worth of damage in Texas.

In August, the agency evacuated more than 3,200 offenders from two Beaumont-area facilities in anticipation of Hurricane Gustav making landfall along the upper Texas coast. Prior to the hurricane's eventual landfall in southwestern Louisiana, TDCJ bused thousands of offenders from coastal units to eight different inland prisons. TDCJ also moved hundreds of halfway house offenders, high-risk parolees and Texas Youth Commission

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(TYC) offenders to secure facilities inland. The evacuation required the use of more than 80 TDCJ buses and was completed without incident. All evacuated offenders were returned to the units of assignment within two days of the storm's landfall. No injuries or significant damage was reported.

Several TDCJ facilities were in the eye of the storm when Ike roared ashore in September. In all, approximately 85 buses were used to move nearly 7,000 offenders and parolees out of harm's way, making it the largest evacuation carried out by TDCJ since Hurricane Rita in 2005.

One facility in particular, Hospital Galveston, felt the full affect of hurricane Ike. Fortunately, the hospital was built to withstand strong storms and the 110 mph wind speeds of the Category 2 hurricane. Unfortunately, the hospital did sustain significant flood damage to nearly every building on campus. Some education programs were restarted within a matter of weeks, but many hospital services were unavailable for months. While

the facility was being repaired, the agency contracted with other hospitals for needed medical services.

Power and phone service were cut to TDCJ units and parole offices throughout the region, including Huntsville, where the agency's central command center had to be relocated because of downed phone lines. The Parole division's district office in Galveston was damaged beyond repair and three parole offices in Houston were severely damaged. In all, 41 TDCJ facilities were without power and running on generators immediately following the storm. Structural damage to prison facilities, however, was minor to moderate and no serious injuries were reported among offenders or staff.

Planning at home

Everyone in your family should be made aware of what to do in the event of a hurricane. Typically, the best plan of action is to evacuate if instructed to do so by authorities. "Run from water and hide from wind"

is a good rule of thumb to keep in mind with hurricanes. Storm surge and flooding are typically a much larger threat than wind during these storms. Even smaller category hurricanes can cause large storm surges. For this reason, it's important to have evacuation plans in place and to take evacuation orders very seriously. Planning in advance for family and residence is even more important for public safety professionals who must continue providing critical services during weather conditions that will close most businesses and may require evacuation.

If you do not evacuate and must stay in place to ride out a hurricane, make sure you have a supply kit on hand. This kit should include several days' worth of drinkable water and nonperishable foods, any special foods for infants or the elderly, personal toiletries and medicines, blankets and pillows, a first aid kit, flashlight and batteries, fully-charged cell phones, and a battery-operated NOAA weather radio. ●