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Hurricane awareness limits personal damage

By Dolores Hajovsky
Reporter

Rainy days may come and go but the threat of a hurricane in the back of everyone's mind can spoil the comforting sound of any evening shower. The high cost of hurricane damage and its deadly dangers can be avoided with the understanding of what a hurricane does.

Hurricane season began June 1 and continues until Oct. 31, and most hurricane activity occurs from Aug. 10 through Oct. 20. Since 1871, 27 of the 43 hurricanes that have hit the Texas coast occurred during August and September.

Damage from hurricanes can be disastrous. Indianola was struck by a hurricane on Sept. 16, 1875. Three-fourths of the town was destroyed and 176 people died. 11 years later on Aug. 20, 1886, Indianola was struck again. This time the storm destroyed the whole town and it never was rebuilt. It is now a state park with a marker explaining how the vicious storm destroyed it.

On Sept. 8-10, 1900, a hurricane hit Galveston killing over 6,000 people. The Great Galveston Hurricane was the largest natural disaster in terms of loss of life in the history of the United States. Damage from the hurricane was estimated between \$50 million and \$40 million.

The most recent hurricane to hit Texas was Alicia, On Aug. 18, 1983. Twenty-one people died and damage went into the billions when it hit the southeast coast.

Coastal communities are still paralyzed when a hurricane threatens, as Galveston was when Alicia struck. When the city's electricity failed the back up electrical system didn't operate at all. The officials were left literally in the dark because they didn't even have a flashlight on hand.

This year Gov. Mark White declared the week of June 3-11, Hurricane Awareness Week. This was to "pump up" people to make them more aware of hurricane probabilities and to make them more knowledgeable of what to do when one strikes, said Robert Lansford, state coordinator for the division of emergency management.

When a storm is brewing in the Gulf of Mexico, the National Weather Service notifies the coastal regions throughout the United States through Acu-Weather, a national weather service. At this point, the storm is called a tropical depression.

When winds in the tropical depression reach 39 mph, the National Hurricane Center gives the hurricane a name. This began in 1953 to avoid the confusion resulting from the latitude and longitude method used before. The names are given an international flavor because hurricanes affect many areas and are tracked by countries other than the United States. This season hurricanes will begin with Arthur and end with Wilfred.

Acu-Weather is the best system available, said Doug Miller, weather broadcaster for KTRH in Houston. Last year, it called Hurricane Alicia "right on the money," he said.

A storm becomes a hurricane when wind speeds reach 74 mph. Once a hurricane develops anywhere along the coast, the first warning sign that is issued is a hurricane watch. This indicates hurricane conditions are a real possibility, usually within 24-36 hours.

Ron Stagno, disaster preparative meteorologist with the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, said the first thing families need to do when a hurricane is approaching is to evaluate their situation. The car should be kept fueled and possible escape routes should be planned. Non-perishable food should be purchased and prescriptions should be filled if needed.

Hurricane season began June 1 and continues until Oct. 31, and most hurricane activity occurs from Aug. 10 through Oct. 20.

If the electricity fails a flashlight with spare batteries and a battery operated radio can be a lifesaver, he said.

Stagno warned that water may become contaminated from the hurricane. Bathtubs, sinks and washing machines need to be filled with clean water as soon as a hurricane becomes a possibility, he said.

If people decide to leave they should turn off the electricity and close the main gas valve, Stagno said. A major cause of death and fire in hurricanes is a broken gas or electricity line that was not turned off.

All outside articles that can blow away should be secured. Garbage cans, garden tools, toys, signs, porch furniture, and many other harmless items become deadly during a hurricane.

A hurricane warning is issued when a hurricane is predicted to strike within 24 hours. A warning may also say where dangerously high water or exceptionally high waves are forecast even though winds may be less than hurricane force.

"Winds with a force of 60 mph equal tornado winds of 100 mph," Stagno said. "Only trucks and other strong vehicles should be driven in winds of 55 mph. In winds greater than 65 mph, no cars should be driven."

Flooding is another danger when driving out in a storm. Sometimes cars can become coffins, Stagno stressed.

In the middle of a hurricane, there are 30-60 minutes of relatively calm weather. This is when eye, or center, of the hurricane is passing over. The eye is noticed by the clear to partly cloudy skies overhead, warm temperatures and light winds.

When the eye of the hurricane passes over, people often think the hurricane is over. This can be disastrous because the other half of the hurricane is still on its way.

Hurricanes also cause an abnormal rise in the sea level, known as storm surge. Storm surge is the

cause of nine out of every 10 hurricane deaths, Stagno warned. Winds of 100 mph can produce eight feet of water and this impact causes drowning. Storm surge is usually accompanied by an increase in Portuguese men-of-war, seaweed and other debris that is washed ashore.

Flooding often occurs far past the coastal regions. When Hurricane Diane made landfall it caused little damage but long after its winds subsided, it brought foods into Pennsylvania, New York and New England.

The most dangerous threat from hurricanes are the tornados that develop. A hurricane can spawn an unlimited number of tornados. The area struck is usually only 200-300 yards wide but the affected area is usually destroyed.

"Any number of tonados can occur because of a hurricane. On Sept. 19-23, 1967, Hurricane Beulah set the record for tornados with 100 and it caused close to \$200 million in damages. Hurricane Alicia scattered 22 tornados over southeastern Texas, last August.

Unfortunately, it is even dangerous for people to stay in their homes during a hurricane because they are often buried in the rubble.

Evacuation is often advised along coastal cities in severe cases. But only the leading city official can order it since the police and national guard have to be called out. This caused problems during Alicia because former Mayor Gus Manuel wouldn't order a mass evacuation, even though White suggested he should. Galveston was lucky because after the hurricane passed over there were few injuries and no fatalities.

Miller said that the media acts as a "pacifier" and source of information for all people in the hurricane area. When it is evident that a hurricane will strike, the radio stations keep in direct contact with the Civil Defense and Red Cross, he explained.

"This gives a central working place," Miller said. "The chaos is like being on an upside down boat, but all the people are working together. Everybody needs each other."

Garvin Berry, broadcaster for KTRH, said during Alicia KTRH cut out all commercials and broadcast 44 hours straight. There was a two-way radio set up with Alvin to get up to the minute reports, he said.

Lynn Murey, a nurse for the Red Cross's Mental Health Groups, said "Because of the shock caused by Alicia last year there have been many psychological problems associated with the hurricane.

"Feelings of loss, stages of sleeplessness, fatigue, sadness and irritability accompanied the disaster. These symptoms generally pass, but in some cases they require help by people trained to assist with shock and the stress of readjustment."

Murey said some people think they will panic when a disaster strikes, but the average person under this type of stress does perform well.

To prepare for a hurricane people need to be on guard as they would for any other disaster that could occur, she said.

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