

The 2007 Houston/Galveston Hurricane Conference

The 2007 Houston/Galveston Hurricane Conference took place on Saturday the 9th. Unfortunately, this was the same weekend as HamCom so many amateurs were at Plano. The 9th was also the 6th anniversary of the Tropical Storm Allison floods. I actually drove through Allison on my way to HamCom. This will be a brief overview as to what was discussed.

The evacuation plan was discussed by the Meteorologist-in-Charge and Warning Coordination Meteorologist of the local office and emergency managers from the City of Houston, and the Counties of Galveston, Harris, and Fort Bend.

The Galveston County OEM will activate whenever a storm enters the Gulf that could threaten the area. The time frame for the planning for the necessary evacuations would be in the area of 96 hours before onset of tropical storm force winds, and evacuations would be called in the area of 48 hours before the onset of tropical storm force winds. This is subject to change since not all tropical systems give the same long lead time as Rita did in 2005.

One key change from the evacuation plan used during Rita to the present plan is that there will be no forced evacuation routes during the mandatory evacuation period. The old plan compelled evacuees onto specific routes. For instance, residents of League City west of FM270 evacuated via IH-45 to Huntsville while residents of League City east of FM270 evacuated via SH-146 to US 59 to Lufkin. Contraflow is in the plan for IH-45, US-290, IH-10, and US-59. The gates and signs necessary to implement contraflow on IH-45 are already in place in Montgomery County. Preparations for contraflow will be started at the destination since TxDOT and DPS must clear the contraflow lanes and block and/or control every onramp and offramp before evacuation traffic can use the contraflow lanes. There will also be better coordination between the affected agencies and better traffic monitoring along the evacuation routes so that traffic issues can be handled quicker and more effectively. It is now possible to observe via traffic cameras the traffic flow on IH-45 all the way to Huntsville. Also, the evacuation zones are now defined by zip codes. Another issue is that residents from outside surge zones will not be prevented from using evacuation routes used by those evacuating surge zones. The legal opinion is that Texas law does not have any provisions to prevent this from happening, even though this was a contributing factor to the massive traffic jams during the Rita evacuation. Those outside of surge zones will be urged by local authorities not to evacuate unless living in flood zones, in mobile homes, or if medical or other issues makes a loss of electricity problematic. Evacuating after the hurricane passage was presented as an alternative. "Run from the water and hide from the wind" was the evacuation guideline. Carpooling, not towing trailers, and evacuating only when directed were urged by the panelists. Fuel will be surged to stations along the official evacuation routes. Also, emergency aid stations will be established along the official evacuation routes and motorist assistance will be available along official evacuation routes.

The Warning Coordination Meteorologist stated to expect at minimum a 20 hour trip from the Galveston area to the Metroplex.

The choke points on IH-45 are at NASA 1 interchange, Conroe, and Corsicana.

There will be better coordination between Houston and the Metroplex since all Houston

special-needs evacuees will be transported to the Metroplex. A similar agreement between Galveston and Austin also exists.

All special -needs persons, defined as those without transportation and/or with medical issues, were urged to register with their county or city emergency management before a hurricane emergency via 311 (for the City of Houston), or 211 (for Harris and Galveston Counties).

The possibility of using railroad assets in evacuations was also discussed.

Airplane assets were used successfully in the Beaumont area to evacuate medical patients before Rita since there was insufficient time to evacuate them via ground ambulances. The insufficient time was due to the earlier than predicted turn to the North. Globemaster 3 and Hercules transports were used in this task. The airport used was Southeast Texas Regional Airport. There are similar plans in the Houston area, Possible airports are George Bush Intercontinental, William P. Hobby, Ellington Field, and Scholes International in Galveston. Pearland Regional Airport can also be used since the new runway was built with Federal funding which requires a runway and taxiways that can take military traffic.

The Unified Area Command will be activated when the area enters the 5-day cone of uncertainty. The UAC will normally be located at Transtar but can also be located at other venues such as HEC, the Houston DPS office, and the Montgomery County EOC.

Dr. Chris Landsea, the Science Officer of the Tropical Prediction Center, discussed the status of forecasts. The accuracy of the track forecast is roughly 100 miles of error per 24 hours and has been improving for the past 15 years. The accuracy of the intensity forecast is much worse than the track forecast, with the 3-5 day intensity forecast having the approximately the same accuracy since the errors are so large that they cannot increase. Even 24 hours out, the predicted intensity can vary from the actual intensity by one category. There has also been no improvement in the intensity forecast accuracy in the past 15 years.

There are new forecast products being issued by the National Hurricane Center. The wind probability forecasts were started last year and state the probability of a location being affected by tropical storm and hurricane force winds. This product is issued as both a text-based and graphical formats. A graphical Tropical Weather Outlook is being issued starting this year.

The accuracy of the seasonal forecasts was discussed by Dr. Landsea. The accuracy of the seasonal forecasts issued by NOAA in June are accurate 1/2 of the time while the accuracy of the August forecasts are accurate 2/3 of the time. He emphasized the fact that even if a season is predicted to be below average, it is still possible to have a hit from a major hurricane. The example given was 1983, which was a El Niño year and had only four named storms. The first was named "Alicia".

Video journalist Doug Kiesling who specializes in videotaping extreme weather events did a presentation on why it is a good idea to evacuate when ordered. He videotaped Charley, Jeanne, Frances, Dennis, and Katrina. He wears a life jacket and a full-face helmet while taping hurricanes due to the flying debris. He has in his estimation destroyed \$250,000 in rental vehicles. Another issue is that insurance will not cover his work related incidents.

The main theme was that residents of all vulnerable areas must be prepared for a hurricane emergency. They must have an evacuation plan if in the surge zone or be prepared to stay put if not in an evacuation zone or in a mobile home, enough supplies for at least three days, take the necessary precautions to protect life and property, and be able to handle an extended power outage, which is 2-3 days for a category 1 hurricane, 2 weeks for a category 3 hurricane, and 2 months for a category 5 hurricane.