

Hurricane Drills Prepare for the Worst

By Joshua C. Johnson (Staff Writer)
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With the images and stories of last year's deadly evacuations during Hurricane Rite and Katrina still vivid in their minds, thousands of emergency planners are undertaking a statewide evacuation drill that's being noted as the largest in Texas history.

"Because of last year's hurricane season, we know that we need to prepare for almost any size scenarios," said Leigh Hornsby, Collin County Spokesperson. "Last year, we didn't shelter as many as Dallas County or some of the larger counties in the state. It continues to be a possibility that we will have to shelter thousands of persons, if an incident becomes that serious."

Last year Plano placed more than 1,500 evacuees of Hurricane Katrina in apartments and registered more than 3,500 in the city's computer systems.

A three-day exercise that began on Tuesday simulates emergency scenarios, covering everything from setting up emergency shelters to preparing highways for contra-flow.

Representatives from the county's largest cities—McKinney, Frisco, and Plano—have met at the county's newly opened Emergency Operations Center in McKinney to facilitate this region's portion of drills.

"The reason that this is helpful is because it gives us an opportunity to work along side with other representatives from our neighboring cities, which we often time offer mutual aide, to learn from each other and improve on relationships," said C.J. Howard, assistant emergency management coordinator for Plano's Department of Homeland Security.

Representatives from Allen and Wylie were available via phone.

This week's simulation isn't entirely realistic. Traffic won't be disrupted more than it already is, and people won't be crammed in makeshift shelters acting as evacuees. But the scenarios still will expose city and state workers to areas of response that they need to improve.

"Periodically, we participate in emergency exercises to help us prepare for anything that might occur and help us to improve on existing procedures," said Hornsby. "This particular scenario prompts the evacuation of the Houston area. In the Collin County area, we are looking at our ability to identify and set up shelters."

With more than 3,000 responders participating, this is the first time that the entire state has participated in the event. After Hurricane Rite exposed some of the state's shortcomings, Gov. Rick Perry's office isn't taking any chances.

Perry sounded the start of the state's largest-ever hurricane preparedness exercise, designed to test state, local and federal officials' readiness to respond to a catastrophic hurricane; to practice new concepts in evacuation and sheltering; and to apply lessons learned from Rite and Katrina. Emergency responders will exercise preparations for a Category 5 storm, with a strength and path that would require an evacuation from surge zones along the entire Texas coast.

"For seven months, we have worked diligently to learn from the challenges of last year's hurricanes, and we have made remarkable progress in our preparedness," Perry said. "With systems to better assist Texans with special needs, new traffic management and fuel plans, and private sector partners to oversee the distribution of food, water, ice and fuel, I believe Texas is a model in preparedness for other states."

The exercise which runs through Friday will focus on six areas- command, control, and communications; evacuation of people with special needs; fuel availability; traffic management and contra-flow; sheltering; and public awareness.

Perry added that the exercise will help the state identify other issues that may need to be resolved before the hurricane season begins on June 1.

Howard says that his office uses the hurricane prediction provided by the department of atmospheric science at Colorado State University, released on April 4, and predicts the American coastline will see another active hurricane season.

The probability of the Gulf Coast seeing at least one major hurricane landfall is 47% according to the prediction- more than 1 ½ times the average likelihood of 30%

