

HURRICANE RESPONSE: A PERSONAL DECISION

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Your decision to react or ignore a hurricane alert will either increase or decrease the threat of injury or death to your family. The storm surge from hurricanes is responsible for nine out of ten deaths from these powerful weather systems. All mandatory evacuation orders are based on escaping the storm surge.

In most instances, your evacuation will not necessarily remove you from hurricane winds, tornadoes, or flash floods. Although moving further inland decreases the chances of hurricane winds, the erratic movements of storms do not permit total assurances of escape from that threat. Tornadoes are killers produced by hurricanes. In 1992, Hurricane Andrew produced a tornado that killed 2 and injured 32. More tragically in 1964, Hurricane Hilda formed a tornado which killed 24 people and injured 164 in Larose. This tornado formed approximately 14 hours before Hurricane Hilda made land fall. Flash flooding is also a threat from hurricanes. The remnants of Hurricane Camille in 1969 caused 13 deaths due to rainfall flooding in Virginia.

But in every comparison, these threats cannot match the massive loss of life which can, and have occurred from storm surges. In 1900, over 6,000 people were killed in Galveston by a surge that was 15 ft. above sea level. In 1893, both the Gulf Coast and the Atlantic Coast were attacked by powerful hurricanes. The August 27, 1893 storm which destroyed the area between Tybee Island, Georgia and Charleston, South Carolina, produced an 18.2 ft. flood which killed from 2,000 to 2,500 people. The Gulf Coast was ravaged by another savage storm on October 1, 1893. The Town of Cheniere Caminada was destroyed with only half of its 1500 inhabitants surviving. The storm continued to destroy fishing villages throughout Southeast Louisiana resulting in 2000 deaths. From 1956 to 1969, six hurricanes did terrible damage in Louisiana with the surge from Hurricane Audrey killing 556 people with its 18 ft. tide.

It has been many years since we have had tremendous carnage from a hurricane in the United States, but many fear the conditions may be ripe from such a terrible occurrence. Our population growth in the last 20 years has been tremendous in coastal areas. This fact with the suggestions by some that in the last 20 years that we have had a reduction in the number of intense storms, provides the conditions which may lead to many deaths.

Possibly the most distressing problem is that evacuation time in some areas easily outstrips the average 12 to 14 hours lead time needed by the National Weather Service to confidently predict

where landfall will occur. New Orleans requires 50 to 72 hours to evacuate according to some studies. Predicting where landfall will occur of a hurricane 50 hours in advance is impossible. In fact, it is difficult to know when a hurricane is 50 hours away from anything, since its forward speed can vary wildly. Should New Orleans evacuate in large numbers, the process will slow or possibly block evacuation from areas that normally could evacuate in time.

This problem would not exist in one, two, or fast moving three class hurricanes since the central and upper parts of Lafourche and neighboring Assumption have adequate elevations along the bayou ridge. The need to evacuate becomes a much graver problem in slow moving three, four, five category hurricanes. Computer models indicate that water levels may exceed ten feet in practically all areas of Lafourche Parish. At that time, we would have to utilize an over burdened I-10. In making your decisions, remember that the official recommendations are issued by officials who have consulted with the National Weather Service and who have tried to prepare and consider all of the problems and threats. Most officials agree that if the most intense part of a major storm hits an area, there will be fatalities. The objective of emergency managers is to minimize the numbers of fatalities.

The numbers of deaths can be reduced only if each individual takes responsibility for himself and his family. The longer a person delays action, the greater the chance of having his options limited. If a person waits too late, it may only be luck which determines his survival.