

County, partner agencies conduct hurricane exercise

By Hector Flores

County staff held a hurricane exercise on April 26 at the Emergency Operations Center to continue to hone their skills, processes and partner agency relationships. These exercises are critical to ensuring our people and policies are prepared for whatever might come our way during the upcoming hurricane season, which begins in less than a month.

Scientists from the Colorado State University's atmospheric science department predicted last month that the 2024 hurricane season would produce 23 named storms, 11 hurricanes and five major hurricanes. That's the highest prediction the world-renowned meteorology program has ever made.

As our Emergency Management Director Patrick Fuller likes to say, "It only takes one storm" to make any hurricane season a bad one. We're not far removed from the 2022 season that produced catastrophic Hurricane Ian and 2023's Hurricane Idalia, which passed more than 150 miles to the west of the county, but still produced widespread flooding that caused bridge and road closures and water damage to numerous homes and businesses.

During the April exercise, staff prepared for a major hurricane to make landfall just to the north of Charlotte County, a worst-case scenario that could produce nearly 10 feet of storm surge. The exercise included evacuation orders for more than 70,000 residents of our red and orange evacuation zones.

The consequences of the pretend storm included countywide water damage, fuel shortages, bridge closures, internet and cable outages, spotty cell phone service and more. Divided into teams covering infrastructure, mass care, communications, public safety and policymakers, county staff and partner agency personnel worked out preparations and responses and identified potential areas of improvement.

The exercise closed with an assessment of goals achieved, lessons learned and process improvements. I've seen our team and partners in action up close during a real emergency and can't stress enough how much effort and care they put into serving our community during the worst of times. You should take comfort that we'll never rest on our laurels. As the exercise showed, there's always ways to improve and be better prepared for the next storm.

With hurricane season fast approaching, I encourage everyone to review your disaster plan, replenish emergency supplies, look over important documents like insurance policies and share your plans with family and friends so they'll know what to expect. Be storm ready and stay safe.

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