

# Summary of the Service Assessment for Hurricane Katrina August 23–31, 2005

## **Event Summary**

Hurricane Katrina was the costliest hurricane to hit the United States and the 5<sup>th</sup> deadliest. Coming ashore near the Louisiana Mississippi border on the morning of August 29, 2005 as a category 3 hurricane it continued to cause havoc inland for 2 more days. According to Louisiana emergency management, it takes 48 to 72 hours to evacuate vulnerable residents from New Orleans. National Hurricane Center's (NHC) forecasts afforded emergency management and the public 56 hours to implement their hurricane plans and make evacuation decisions along the north central Gulf Coast.

## **Challenge – Coordinating Effectively with all the Stakeholders**

The Director of NHC called the Governor of Louisiana, Governor of Mississippi, Mayor of New Orleans, and the Alabama Emergency Management Agency to underscore the severe nature of Katrina and the potential for large loss of life. These calls had a profound effect on these officials and each mentioned it the following day during various press conferences. The afternoon of August 26, the first Southeast Louisiana Hurricane Task Force (hereafter referred to as the Task Force) conference call was held. Task Force conference calls are organized and directed by the Louisiana Homeland Security Operations Center (LHSOC).

All Mississippi emergency managers contacted by the assessment team said that conference calls with NWS field offices during Katrina were of great value. However, they noted that scheduling the myriad of calls was a challenge. Weather Forecast Offices (WFO) utilized Instant Messaging as an effective additional communication tool to coordinate and exchange hydrometeorological information with emergency managers and the media prior to and during Katrina.

## **Challenge – Dealing with Uncertainty**

On August 26, WFO New Orleans/Baton Rouge contacted emergency managers in southeast Louisiana and coastal Mississippi to advise them to monitor Katrina. While they explained the uncertainty inherent in two and three day tropical cyclone forecasts, they noted the westward computer model trends and that Katrina could be a major hurricane at landfall - Category 3 or 4. They told them to prepare for potential hurricane watches and warnings the following day.

## **Challenge – Motivating the proper response**

WFO New Orleans/Baton Rouge issued vividly worded statements describing the likely dire impacts of Katrina and the resulting post-storm environment across southeast Louisiana and coastal Mississippi a day prior to landfall.

The emergency management directors in the New Orleans area found the FEMA Introduction to Hurricane Preparedness course, co-sponsored by NHC personnel, to be essential for effectively utilizing NWS tropical cyclone products and services during Hurricane Katrina.

The advice given in warnings for extreme winds is for people to take shelter in “an interior room of the lowest floor” of a building. During Hurricane Katrina, these warnings were issued for counties also at risk for storm surge flooding. Hurricane Local Statements describing the potential flooding hazard called for people to go to the highest floor of a building.