

CLEANING PROCESS CONTINUES

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Written By Keith Blackmar

As the darkness of Hurricane Kate, considered by some the most powerful November hurricane in United States history, gave way to sunlight Friday morning, November 22, residents of Wakulla County and the surrounding counties began the process of poking around the debris to survey damage.

Kate was an angry storm that left much wider damage to property than the Labor Day weekend encounter with Hurricane Elena. Wakulla County residents seemed to be grateful that they had their health, but many were saddened by heavy losses. Despite the damage, many felt that the storm could have been worse.

As Hurricane Kate approached the Gulf Coast Thursday, November 21, coastal areas braced for the storm. Damage was heavy on much of the Wakulla coast, but inland the damage was mostly limited to trees falling on electrical wires and homes. On the coastline water was also a large concern.

The evacuation process began early Thursday morning, but many coastal residents stated that they waited until the water began to rise., Lt Charlie Landrum, of the Wakulla County Sheriff's Office, said that he felt the evacuation process went better than it did during Elena. He added that residents seemed to use better judgment.

The town of St Marks became well known as national news broadcasts used the town as a reference point.

Within the town, Dewey Goldenetz said that he told his children the storm was an adventure. "We don't need any more adventures," he said, after Hurricane Kate had taken her toll on St Marks.

Goldenetz owns the St Marks Country Store in town and his damage was mostly the result of rising water. "It showed us that there was some water out there," he said.

The store received three feet of water inside its walls and a loss of beer and groceries. "The water went up to the Shell Island Road and that is the highest that people say they've ever seen it," he said.

The salt water damaged food racks with rust while mud and seaweed have also become a problem. "I think people are in kind of good humor," Goldenetz said, despite his losses.

Two local fishing stops were hurt by the storm. Both Shields Marina and Shell Island Fish Camp were damaged by Hurricane Kate. Ruthie Hobbs of Shell Island said, "You won't be getting a fish report from Shell Island for a while."

Hobbs said that the water came in fast and left behind muddy roads and debris. The store and sheds are still standing, but the clean-up work appears endless. Hobbs said that power was restored fairly quickly after the storm and noted, "I guess they got (power to) the hardest hit areas first."

Up the coast in Spring Creek Elizabeth Hinton, of Bud's Marina, stated that damage occurred as the water rose. Windows were broken by floating furniture and freezers, ice makers, shrimp tanks, stoves and refrigerators.

She said that water traveled up the highway more than a quarter of a mile and many residents followed it until it finally started to go down.

Hinton said that she and her husband were ready to move as they kept pace with warnings. "I don't have to be told twice," she said. Businesses that survived the storm were in the process of cleaning up over the weekend. The Spears fish house was severely damaged and lost many coolers worth of fish.

Shell Point residents watched the news with concern as they wondered what would become of their homes and boats. Diane Ayer, of Shell Point Realty, said, "We're a mess."

Damage could be seen all over the point, with the hardest hit areas on Live Oak Island and Oyster Bay. Ayer said that sand was pushed under many of the elevated homes on the point and boats were scattered on dry land. Trees were down and some roads were washed out.

Boats under covered sheds at the Shell Point Marina were blown from the east side of the marina to the west side of the building. Only 40 of 144 Shell Point Realty boat slips got through the storm without some sort of damage.

Damage also occurred at Paradise Village, where sheds and added on porches suffered most. Ayer said that the thing that struck her most was a boat in the middle of the highway as she returned from Tallahassee. She added that it was a couple of miles from the water and could have come from anywhere.

Panacea seemed to escape the heavy seaweed coating that Elena left behind, but the manager of Bayside Marina found little comfort in that fact.

Vivian Johnson said that the marina lost its wet storage and dock areas after Hurricane Kate pulled through. The bridge, road and building seemed to do just fine. Johnson said the winds sounded like a huge freight train pounding on the shore.

Bayside Marina workers took the customers boats up the river and waited out the storm. The crew tied down the docks, but the storm had other ideas. Johnson's home, down from the marina, fared better. Nails, boards and docks were scattered all over the roadway as efforts to clean up the mess continued.

Arline Petrandis, of Angelo's restaurant, said that their building had some window damage, plumbing trouble and deck troubles, which have since been cleared up. "I feel so lucky after seeing pictures of Carrabelle," she said. Her home at Tide Creek was covered with grass and efforts were underway to clean the area.

None of the Petrandis' food was lost as the restaurant took precautions and placed all their stock in the freezer and kept the door closed. The restaurant reopened over the weekend, but Petrandis said that people did not appear to be in a restaurant mood.

Sopchoppy had their problems, but seemed to come through very well. Jackie Lawhon stated that some tin was pulled off old buildings and a few trees fell in the area.

Claxton Vause found himself with a tree in his home and was forced to move to the Sopchoppy Baptist Church. Some roads were blocked and clean-up continued.

The Sopchoppy Water System did well, according to Bill Stephens. A generator kept water to customers throughout the storm and there were no problems.

In Crawfordville residents were forced to deal with a lack of electrical power and the Crawfordville Baptist Church lost a bell tower, but problems were at a minimum. Dell Little, of Crawfordville, called the storm a frightening experience.

Ron Grbavcik, an American Red Cross Disaster Services volunteer from Cleveland, Ohio said that an American Red Cross Disaster Assistance Center was being set up at the livestock pavilion from Tuesday, November 26 until further notice.

He said a Damage Assessment will be taken of the county and the center would be set up to help individuals. If the American Red Cross determines that a need is present a shelter may be established to feed large groups of victims.

While residents attempted to cope with Hurricane Kate, the other side of the storm was the men who worked to restore power.

Ed Colvin stated that Florida Power had restored power to 100 percent of their Wakulla County customers by Tuesday, November 26 after crews worked all night for three nights. About 95 percent had power when the crews finally went home for the night Monday, November 25.

Clean-up work is the next order of business for Florida Power and crews from central and south Florida have been sent home. "Hurricane Kate was bad," Colvin said. He noted that they have originally thought that the crews would have to be working through thanksgiving.

Wakulla County suffered a total blackout during the storm, as poles were broken, lines were snapped and transformers burned. Glassy-eyed repairmen worked 35 to 40 hour before being pulled off for rest. Colvin estimated that the crew exceeded 50 men during the storm.

Slowly, the power began to return to Wakulla, but Colvin said the power companies were hampered by heavy use of the Tallahassee phone exchanges.

"I'm real happy," Colvin added, "I got to sleep in my own bed last night."

Everything was not as cheerful for George Galloway, of Talquin Electric of Quincy. Talquin lost 95 percent of their entire system in Leon, Wakulla, Gadsden and Liberty counties and only 70 to 75 percent of the system had been returned to normal by Tuesday, November 26.

Galloway said that crews were divided equally in all four counties. "We're doing everything we can on very little rest," Galloway said. Over 275 men worked with Talquin in the four county area to restore service. Falling trees caused the largest headaches, but major damage was found at the Shadeville substation and that project took a vast amount of time to repair.

"This was much worse than Elena," Galloway said. Elena did not do the widespread damage that Kate did and Talquin found themselves spread out all over the Big Bend area. Galloway said it would be the end of the week before all customers got their power back. "I'm hoping 85 percent by tonight. (Tuesday)," he said.

Talquin serves about 30,000 customers in the four county area with 3,386 from Wakulla, 15,000 from Leon, 9,000 from Gadsden and the rest from Liberty.

Eva Nelson, of the Wakulla Road Department, said that the storm was a headache for her department. An emergency crew kept watch on the county during the storm and also kept the roads clear as possible from trees. Most of the trees have been taken care of by the department, which will now concentrate on grading roads. Highway 61 was one of the hardest hit roads, as far as downed trees is concerned. Lt Landrum, of the Sheriff's Office, reported that the county got by "Scott Free" from injuries and only a few reports have been made of thefts.

Sheriff David Harvey was glad the storm and its immediate emergencies were over, after two days and nights on the job. "I finally got a chance to sleep all day Saturday," he said.

The evacuation process took place in St Marks, Spring Creek, Shell Point, Mashers Sands, Surf Road, Live Oak Island and Panacea, he said. A distress signal at the St Marks Yacht Club was picked up by an emergency plane from Eglin Air Force Base, but when it was pinpointed it turned out to be a boat alarm sounding because water had entered the boat.

The Florida Highway Patrol reported that roads in Franklin County were in the process of being repaired by the state department of transportation. A spokesman said, "We've been very fortunate that we haven't had any serious accidents."

County officials have been in the process of attempting to set up meetings between themselves and the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), Landrum said. There is a good possibility that FEMA will set up a regional office, similar to the one they set up after Elena to handle claims.

Overall, many residents said that they would take this week's Thanksgiving holiday to give thanks that the storm did not do any more damage to the area than it did and that no lives were lost in Wakulla to hurricane Kate.