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STRAND PUSHES BETTER PREPARATION

Tonya Root The Sun News

Additional hurricane evacuation routes, better building codes to strengthen structures and a more accurate five-day forecast for hurricane tracks would better prepare the Grand Strand when a tropical system threatens, officials said Wednesday during a Senate subcommittee hearing in Myrtle Beach.

As Irene, the ninth named tropical storm of the hurricane season, loomed in the Atlantic Ocean, officials gathered at Springmaid Beach Convention Center to talk about what could be done to lessen the effect of such storms on coastal communities, specifically the Grand Strand.

Myrtle Beach's total loss to tourism in 2004, mostly from Hurricane Charley, was more than \$30 million. In 1999, Hurricane Floyd cost South Carolina \$60 million, most of it in Horry County, and in 1989, Hurricane Hugo caused an estimated \$750 million in damages in Horry County.

The information was collected as part of a subcommittee hearing for the Senate's Committee on Commerce, Science and Transportation and could be used for future legislation related to stronger building codes, funding for more evacuation routes or more pre-disaster mitigation, officials said.

Brad Dean, president of the Myrtle Beach Area Chamber of Commerce; Paul Whitten, Horry County's public safety director; Jim Gandy, a Columbia-based TV meteorologist; David Prevatt, a Clemson University wind expert; and The Weather Channel's Jim Cantore testified before Sen. Jim DeMint, R-S.C., during the hearing.

``We have to be prepared to get people off the coast and safe inland," Cantore said during his testimony. ``We want to tell people to get out of harm's way and reduce the stresses of getting out of harm's way."

More evacuation routes, specifically a southern connector and Interstate 73, could relieve some stress residents have when fleeing the coast during a storm, officials said.

During his testimony, Whitten said the development of a southern connector in Horry County could prevent the repeat of a traffic jam similar to what occurred during Hurricane Floyd evacuations. He noted that better plans including more lane reversals will help the next time an evacuation is ordered.

If buildings were constructed to withstand hurricane forces and away from storm-surge paths, more residents and visitors might not have to evacuate, officials said.

“The fact remains we need to build stronger buildings and facilities,” Prevatt said. He lobbied for more money to research wind-resistant building techniques.

The technology is available to build structures to withstand a storm, but it's not being done because of increased costs and lack of incentives, DeMint said.

“We can build buildings to withstand the winds of a hurricane; we know where the surges are going to happen. ... I think there's a lot more we can do than building an evacuation route,” DeMint said. “If we have good evacuation routes like I-73, then we don't have to evacuate until we know the storm is going to hit.”

Fewer evacuations also could mean less effect on the area's tourism-driven economy, Dean said.

“The economic costs of a hurricane start long before it makes landfall,” Dean said. “Safety should be our top concern ... but we certainly strive to balance that with the economic impact.”

When vacationers change their plans because a storm threatens the coast, it costs the area as much as \$40 million a day, Dean said. The development of the five-day forecast also raised concern because it is not as accurate as the three-day forecast, Dean said.

“The five-day forecast was implemented with little or no input from the tourism industry, but it appears this forecast is here to stay,” Dean said. “We believe the five-day forecast will be far more useful when its accuracy is improved.”

Cantore, who works as an on-air meteorologist and is host of “Storm Stories” for The Weather Channel, said improvements are being made in the forecast but officials will never be able to predict how intense a storm could be at landfall so precautions are necessary.

“There's never been a perfect forecast to the best of my knowledge,” Cantore said.

His appearance was noteworthy for many in attendance Wednesday as he posed for photographs with officials and shook hands.

“Normally when Mr. Cantore arrives we're not pleased,” Dean said, “so we want to welcome him.”

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