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When Disaster Strikes

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By Kim A. O'Connell

JUDGING BY THE IMAGES ON TELEVISION, last fall's hurricane season was marked by chaos and confusion. With federal, state and local responders on the ground, communication lines broken, and uncertainty about funding and supplies, the situation often seemed dire. Throughout the Gulf Coast, however, many waste companies and other cleanup specialists quietly executed well-organized plans for disaster cleanup and recovery.

The challenge, though, was immense. Hurricane Katrina — followed shortly by hurricanes Rita and Wilma — left the solid waste industry with a complex and widespread cleanup effort. Haulers faced debris piles that were so large it was difficult to segregate solid waste from hazardous waste. Trucks ran around the clock, and customers disposed of far more waste than usual. Many companies also had to locate displaced personnel or secure temporary housing for employees directly impacted by the storms. Oftentimes, whether a company already had a disaster response or business continuity plan in place made the difference between running smoothly and running behind.

"While there is always a lot of focus in disaster response on the human factor, and rightfully so, Hurricane Katrina highlighted the enormous logistical challenge that the waste industry, state and local governments and others face when dealing with cleaning up after natural disasters," says David Biderman, general counsel for the National Solid Wastes Management Association, Washington, and moderator of the "The Aftermath: Katrina Cleanup Operations" workshop at WasteExpo in Las Vegas. The workshop will be held on Thursday, April 6, at 10:30 a.m. A related workshop, "Emergency Planning," will be held at the show at 9 a.m. on the same day.

Ready to Respond — Right Away

Ralph Foster, a senior emergency responder with the Illinois Environmental Protection Agency in Springfield, has responded to a wide variety of disasters, from tornadoes to train wrecks. He believes the major mistake people and companies make is being too afraid to make a misstep. "One of the things we emphasize is that you can't let a disaster get ahead of you; you have to get ahead of it," Foster says. "If there is a storm or a major oil spill, the quicker the action is taken, the less the long-term impact will be and the less money you will spend. Plan ahead; take quick action; look at what can occur; and minimize the impact. If you can defend what you do from a common-sense standpoint, then do it."

Last October, just when many thought the worst from Katrina and Rita was over, Hurricane Wilma struck Florida, causing a major storm surge and widespread damage. The state had what some called "hurricane fatigue," having endured four serious hurricanes in 2004. Yet that

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experience ultimately may have served the waste industry well.

"Wilma hit on a Monday morning, and on Tuesday we had some trucks out on the street, dealing with some emergency situations," says Will Flower, vice president of communications for Fort Lauderdale, Fla.-based Republic Services. "By Wednesday we had all but five trucks [out of about 150 vehicles] out running the routes."

In May 2005, the company had hosted a seminar for its customers in south Florida to discuss lines of communication during and after disasters, how to handle contracts for storm debris and how to work with agencies such as the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). "It focused everyone on what needed to be done, and sure enough, there was soon a need to put those plans into place," Flower says.

As Wilma neared the Florida coast, the company first ensured that all fuel tanks were full and radios and cell phones charged. It also brought in an extra tanker truck of gasoline from central Florida. With employee security and safety being paramount, the company partnered with a contractor to supply nonperishable food for employees, and distributed pallets of canned sausages, salmon and other goods.

"We understood that our people will come to work if they feel their homes are secure and their families are safe," Flower says. "What people need to recognize is that, if it's a big storm, it's going to take some time to respond, so employees have to come first. After the storm, we ran for three weeks straight including Saturdays and Sundays, and that's tough on our drivers and helpers. They rose to the challenge, and we made sure they were taken care of." As an added bonus, the company had t-shirts printed with the slogan "Riders on the Storm."

Allied Waste Industries, Scottsdale, Ariz., also has extensive operations throughout the Gulf Coast region, so Hurricane Katrina hit the company particularly hard.

About 100 Allied employees were displaced, requiring housing, food and financial relief. It took company officials three weeks to locate everyone, yet the company's advanced planning allowed them to swing into action fairly quickly. Allied had convened six response teams with specific responsibilities: a people team charged with locating, feeding and sheltering employees; a facilities team to deal with infrastructure; a customer team to talk to residents, businesses and the press; an operating team to keep things running; a financing team to handle accounting and payroll; and a government team to communicate with FEMA and other agencies. The company also had field managers operating out of Biloxi, Miss., and New Orleans.

"We had our teams in place the next day after the storm," says Lang Herndon, Allied's assistant vice president of operations. "We have a basic checklist that we go through, which we developed years ago, and we updated it after Hurricane Ivan [in 2004]. Taking care of the employee base is key. You can't do enough for your employees. That's what defines a company, how you treat your employees."

Ins and Outs of Emergency Planning

In the waste industry, disaster planning has both an internal and an external element. In addition to dealing with employees affected by

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disasters, companies must ensure that records and data are secure and that equipment is safe, all while continuing to serve customers.

David Merrill, director of business development for Delta Innovations, Normal, Ill., helps companies prepare for business interruptions and natural disasters by securing and backing up their data in off-site locations. Merrill lists five steps that waste companies must consider when planning their response: 1) Assess the particular threats to your business; 2) determine the likelihood of those events occurring and the impact they would have on various aspects of your business; 3) discern how to eliminate or respond to those things; 4) prepare a plan based on those determinations; and 5) include a recovery phase.

Haulers also must be prepared to serve affected customers in the midst of unexpected waste volumes and types, altered routes, and disposal sites that are ill-equipped for the influx. A 1999 report from U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, Washington, suggests several elements that should be included in a disaster preparedness plan for solid waste operations: a long-term debris management protocol, a plan for mutual aid agreements, a sound and detailed communication strategy, identified collection and storage sites, and a plan for federal and state reimbursement.

As one of the top waste companies in the Southeast, Waste Industries in Raleigh, N.C., has seen its share of hurricanes. "Whenever there is a hurricane, we have at least one branch that is affected by it," says Josh Hammond, environmental and safety specialist for the firm.

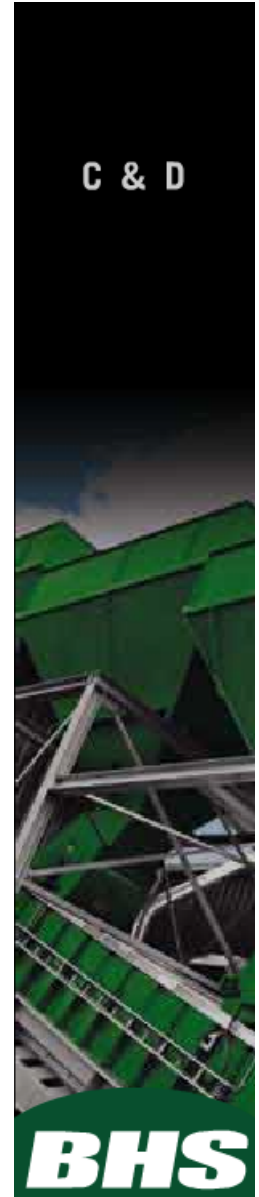
Four years ago, the company developed an emergency response team called Rapid Response and Emergency Deployment for Operation Needs and Expertise (RRED ONE) that is composed of people with different skills from throughout the company. The team assisted in the recovery effort after Hurricane Isabel hit the Norfolk, Va., region in 2003, sleeping on cots in a Waste Industries facility and showering in a recreational vehicle outside.

"We can send the team to an affected area, and if employees aren't able to make it into work, we have people on the ground who can get behind the wheel and get the trash picked up," Hammond says. "We have modified our team since it was initially put in place. It's expanded from responding to natural disasters to other operations such as an acquisition and startup."

Because there is participation from all levels of the company, Hammond says he now has flexibility and a deep talent pool of people to draw upon when pulling together a RRED ONE response team. Even in a non-disaster situation, such as the acquisition of a mom-and-pop company, having the response team on the ground helps to ease anxiety, he says. "We can put an experienced driver in a truck with a new driver, and they speak the same language."

Emergency responders agree that communication should be the crux of any disaster preparedness plan. In addition to having updated phone lists, companies must determine how they will communicate if phone lines and computers are knocked out. After Katrina, for instance, an Allied driver delivered messages back and forth via pickup truck.

In its critical February report assessing the response to Katrina, the U.S. House of Representatives acknowledged that communications



were disrupted throughout the Gulf Coast region, but noted that officials had failed to adequately plan for alternatives. "Despite the devastation left by Katrina, this needn't have been the case," the report states. "Catastrophic disasters may have some unpredictable consequences, but losing power and the dependent communications systems after a hurricane should not be one of them."

Flower agrees. "Planning ensures that you have open lines of communication in place, that you know who is responsible for what activities, and that everyone is flexible and responsive to changing needs," he says. "You need to determine what kind of situation you might face, whether it be tornadoes, floods or earthquakes. Take a look around and ask yourself, 'What are we going to do if this happens and then who's going to do it?'"

Just as important, Flower says, is to sit down with key personnel after a disaster or other major event and assess what aspects worked well and what needs improvement.

Beyond Borders

Finally, Merrill encourages waste companies to view each other as allies, not competitors, when disaster occurs. "Disasters will happen," he says. "Those who prepare for it themselves are then the ones who can better help others. One thing not thought about is how the industry can support one another. If any given area of the country is hit on the scale of Katrina, no one company is prepared to deal with it. The waste industry has to utilize one of their existing organizations and look at this holistically, because if the livelihood of this industry is ever threatened by a disaster, they need to pull together."

Kim A. O'Connell is a contributing writer based in Arlington, Va.