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Storm system: One year after Ike, Lufkin and Angelina County have instituted new policies to help combat events like last year's hurricanes

By STEVEN ALFORD
The Lufkin Daily News

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One year ago today Hurricane Ike struck Texas.

First, by way of Galveston, the large storm headed north as it traveled up the eastern edge of Texas wreaking havoc.

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File photo by Joel Andrews (ENLARGE)

The metal roof and sign at Southwood Food Mart on Southwood Drive near Pershing Avenue was blown to the ground one year ago during Hurricane Ike.



File photo by Jessica Savage (ENLARGE)

A house at 2505 Atkinson Drive is shown days after Hurricane Ike hit Lufkin. A tree landed on the house, tearing through the roof.



Jessica Savage/The Lufkin Daily News (ENLARGE)

A house at 2505 Atkinson Drive was severely damaged after Hurricane Ike hit Lufkin. A tree landed on the house, tearing through the roof. The same house, nearly a year later, has a patched roof and siding.

The next several days would leave thousands of East Texans without power, while some outlying cities, including Corrigan, Livingston and Houston, were without power and fuel for up to two weeks.

Ike came just two weeks after Hurricane Gustav.

Unfortunately, Hurricane Gustav triggered one of the largest evacuations in U.S. history, with more than 3 million people fleeing the storm which weakened considerably as it made landfall, eventually downgrading to a tropical storm.

As people returned to their homes and Ike approached two weeks later, it seemed as though many figured they could wait out the storm, instead of evacuating as they did for Hurricane Gustav.

Now a year later, city and county officials say they have learned a lot from their experiences with Ike and are better prepared.

Keith Wright, assistant city manager and emergency management coordinator for Lufkin, said he and his staff have made great strides since last year, although damage-wise, Hurricane Rita was much more destructive to East Texas.

"We really made some big strides between Rita and Ike," Wright said. "Ike went a lot better for the city as far as response time. Once you went through Rita, Ike was not near as bad. Rita was a shorter period, but it had stronger winds, whereas Ike went on forever, but the winds were not as bad."

Since Hurricane Ike, Wright said the city and county have instituted several new policies to help combat another event like last year's storms.

"We're doing some things right now to take it to the next level to be prepared for the next hurricane or event," he said. "We've instituted a new preventative debris cleanup contract that will kick in should a hurricane come our way. We've also got brand new computer software to help with communication to other counties and government agencies and all of our staff has received a lot more training."

The new software package, "Web EOC," ties all of the Deep East Texas counties together, allowing local, state and federal agencies to communicate damage, needs and information quicker and easier than ever before, Wright said.

"The new software gives us a more coordinated approach in an event and allows us to coordinate our departments on the fly," he said. "It allows you to input significant information like sheltering and resource data that, depending on how you want to distribute it, everyone can have immediate access to."

Angelina County Judge Wes Suiter said on a county level staff has learned a lot from recent storms.

"I think we're miles ahead of where we were a year ago. I think we get that way after each occurrence," Suiter said. "Each time a hurricane hits, we think we're ready for anything and then the lessons are learned and we interject that into our training for the next season."

Suiter said the new software, along with MAC (Multi Agency Coordination) training, has enabled Angelina County to work with other local governments toward the common goal of getting everything online as quick as possible following a hurricane.

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