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Air Force element focuses on storm preparedness

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TYNDALL AIR FORCE BASE

Hurricanes and tropical storms usually are preceded by people trying to get out of the way.

But the components of Air Force Northern Command at Tyndall Air Force Base prepare in a different way: They look at how to get people in.

As the Air Force element of the United States Northern Command, AFNorth is responsible for protecting the skies over the continental U.S. During a hurricane, that job can intensify over specific areas as evacuation or relief operations kick into gear. To prepare, AFNorth and other Northern Command personnel deploy to operations centers. Then, they do what military personnel excel at: They wait.

"A lot of what AFNorth does is get prepared and positioned so that we can support whatever request may come from the state, and then work closely with the state authorities to ensure that we efficiently use the resources we have available to assist them in either pre-landfall activities or postlandfall activities," said Col. Jeff Lofgren, AFNorth's vice commander.

The key is waiting to see what, if anything, the Northern Command units are needed for in the affected areas. Ideally, the Federal Emergency Management Agency, or FEMA, will have enough state and local resources available to provide all needed assistance, but if the resources are not available or specialized needs arrive, AFNorth representatives can coordinate with FEMA officials to fill the gaps.

"We are directly coordinating with the states to understand what it is they want," Lofgren said. "So when that request happens, it's not the first time we've heard about it. We've been working with them, and we're able to quickly respond to that task.

"We then coordinate not only with those state and local authorities, but also with the inner agency partners — everybody from (the Federal Aviation Administration) to FEMA to (Department of Homeland Security) to provide whatever capability they are looking for."

In response to Hurricane Katrina in 2005, with a rescue effort largely seen as unsuccessful, emergency management has taken on a distinctly more pre-emptive approach. The point is to have forces there before, not fight to get them in after.

"We now have, I think, learned our lesson," Lofgren said. "We've established the working relationships that are required to provide that assistance in a timely manner. We have worked through exercises at the national level and local level (to identify) what people need, how to request that need and how to get that need satisfied. That's why you see so much activity in preparation for these types of things."

