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When Duty Calls

TCEQ emergency responders provided needed assistance in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, then rushed home from Louisiana to confront her sister, Rita.

Agency staff pull dual storm assignments

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The TCEQ Strike Team is trained to confront all sorts of emergencies. But back-to-back hurricanes along the Gulf Coast was a scenario that few had anticipated.

Nonetheless, the team responded quickly—first in Louisiana to deal with the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, then rushing back in time to encounter Rita, which would unleash a powerful blow to Southeast Texas.

The 14-member Strike Team and scores of other TCEQ employees from regional offices reported for duty in both states, addressing environmental hazards and helping to restore vital public services. The Strike Team is a select group of agency personnel trained to deal with natural or man-made events that trigger an environmental crisis. While many TCEQ employees are trained in emergency response, the Strike Team is usually the first to respond.



An estimated 80 percent of New Orleans was underwater after Hurricane Katrina devastated the region in late August. TCEQ emergency responders arrived soon after with badly needed communications equipment and mobile laboratories. / Photo by FEMA

TCEQ Storm Coverage

The TCEQ had a significant presence (shaded areas) in the aftermath of two devastating hurricanes. After Katrina hit Louisiana, the agency's Strike Team and other emergency personnel assisted with recovery operations in and around New Orleans. When Rita finished pounding Southeast Texas, TCEQ staff moved into the affected areas to deal with hazardous materials and to help restore drinking water and wastewater operations.



"The TCEQ will be at the scene of any event that threatens human health and the environment," says Chairman Kathleen Hartnett White. "When the state of Louisiana called seeking assistance after their hurricane, we knew immediately the answer would be yes, let's go help our neighbors."

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Request for Help

In fact, the call from the Louisiana Department of Environmental Quality (LDEQ) came Aug. 31, only two days after New Orleans and surrounding parishes were ravaged by a Category 4 hurricane that inundated the low-lying area and its infrastructure.

With approval from the Governor's Division of Emergency Management, the Strike Team and other emergency response staff set out for the LDEQ headquarters in Baton Rouge, where the group would sleep on cots in a conference room for three weeks and shower at a nearby YMCA.

During that time, the team and agency specialists in surface water quality monitoring paired off with LDEQ and Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) representatives for daily forays into flooded areas around New Orleans and eventually

into the devastated city.

The Strike Team drew on its broad expertise—its members bring years of experience in emergency response, industrial and hazardous waste, drinking water, surface water, and air monitoring. Those skills were put to use in searching for leaking industrial tanks, floating hazardous waste, "orphaned" petroleum drums that had washed away

from industrial sites, and other environmental problems. Once hazards were identified, each group would use satellite coordinates to log the locations for recovery teams.

Other TCEQ staff members collected water samples and helped conduct analyses. With floodwaters showing unusually high levels of contaminants, it was important to identify the toxins as soon as possible.

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All of these support duties were suspended once the TCEQ got word that a mega-storm was moving toward Texas. On Sept. 25, the day after Hurricane Rita made landfall near Sabine Pass, the Strike Team and staff from several TCEQ regional offices converged on the area.

Again, lodgings posed a problem, recalls Strike Team Leader Jeff Lewellin, because the battered regional office in Beaumont was closed and none of the surrounding towns had power. For the first week, the team commuted from Houston to reach storm-damaged communities each day.

Lewellin and his colleagues participated in flyover reconnaissance missions to inspect damage to oil refineries and other industrial facilities, and surveyed communities to determine the extent of damage to drinking water and wastewater treatment plants. Early on, the agency identified about 200 public drinking water systems that were not functioning. For these facilities, staff helped line up generators and needed fuel.

The agency's dam safety team visited the Livingston and Conroe lakes to assess damage. Although both dams remained stable, storm surges had cut into slopes near the structures.



Other TCEQ activities included assessing spills, consulting on debris removal, contacting landfills to determine which were operational, and inspecting state and federal Superfund sites in the affected areas. Specialists investigated a large number of fish kills to determine whether the origins of contamination were industrial, municipal, or nonpoint sources.

Backing up the TCEQ was the 6th Civil Support Team, Weapons of Mass Destruction Unit, which was deployed by the Division of Emergency Management. The National Guard unit assisted with communications and helped deal with orphan containers and hazardous materials.

Cost estimates of the damage in Southeast Texas range from \$2 billion to \$6 billion in insured losses. Twenty-two counties have been declared

eligible for federal disaster assistance.

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Disaster Recovery

In retrospect, Lewellin says the two natural disasters differed in that the one that inundated Louisiana "was related primarily to flooding and storm surges, while the one that affected East Texas was more of a wind and power-outage disaster."

The agency played different roles in each. After Katrina, the TCEQ and its 45 representatives took assignments from the LDEQ. After Rita, though, personnel from three TCEQ regions were out front in all aspects of environmental assessment and recovery.

"Our duties typically are across the board, reflecting the broad scope of responsibilities for which the TCEQ has oversight," Lewellin explains. "In a disaster, our priorities will focus on drinking water and wastewater, because those have the most immediate impact on the public. Emergency spills are right up there, too.

"Also, we'll go through every refinery and petrochemical plant to learn the extent of damage and whether spills occurred. Even air pollution is a concern after a hurricane, because much of the debris may have to be burned."

In Louisiana, the TCEQ's mobile laboratories proved to be invaluable, he says. In fact, the LDEQ assigned most of the floodwater analysis of E. coli levels to TCEQ staff. Those reports were posted each day on EPA's Web



site.

"They relied on our specialized equipment, which the Strike Team travels with. It's something we can do on the spot," says Lewellin.

"We were really proud to assist them in this way. I think we made a real contribution."

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