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Sam Houston EC prepares for Rita

LIVINGSTON – As Hurricane Rita strengthens in the Gulf of Mexico with its ever developing eye setting its sight on the Texas coast, Sam Houston Electric Cooperative is beginning to make its emergency management preparations.

At this time, the Cooperative has eight Line Technicians and more than 50 contractors assisting with the Katrina restoration efforts in Louisiana. Chief Operations Officer David Babcock said a decision has been made to recall these employees and contractors back to East Texas effective immediately.

More than 40 hotel rooms have been reserved in the area for contractors to assist in a possible restoration process, Babcock said. Additionally, arrangements have been made to use Pedigo Park in Livingston as an additional stationing area. With more than 6,000 miles of distribution line crisscrossing some of the densest woods in the state, Sam Houston Electric Cooperative could be vulnerable to high winds and possible tornadoes that are associated with hurricanes.

The Communications Department is prepared to launch its new Storm Central addition to the corporate Web site, www.samhouston.net. This new page will feature outage updates, emergency contact information and links to weather tracking Web sites.

“We feel this will be a valuable tool for both members and employees as it will be a central location to find out about our recovery process and how to receive help following the storm,” said Keith Stapleton, the Co-op’s Chief Communications Officer. “Providing this type of information is will enable us to better communicate how we’re helping our members and reassure them we are doing everything necessary to restore their power as quickly as possible.”

Wednesday, Rita intensified into a Category 4 storm today with winds of 135 mph, deepening concerns that the storm could devastate coastal Texas and already-battered Louisiana by week's end.

As of Tuesday, the National Hurricane Center's latest official forecast names the stretch

of coast just north of Matagorda Island as Rita's most likely target instead of Galveston, but with landfall on the Gulf Coast not expected before Friday night, meteorologists caution that predictions remain unreliable.

Long-range forecasts such as this are typically off by hundreds of miles, and different computer models call for different landfalls. Moreover, the overnight course shift is small, so preparations continue in the danger zone from northern Mexico to Lake Charles, La.

"We're definitely not out of the woods yet," said Kent Prochazka, a meteorologist with the National Weather Service in League City in a Tuesday interview with the Houston Chronicle.

If Rita does in fact hit closer to Matagorda than Galveston as a Category 3 hurricane, the Houston area, and by proxy, Sam Houston EC's service territory, would be in for high winds, heavy rain and possibly tornadoes, but that wouldn't be as dangerous for the area as a direct hit on Galveston, Prochazka said.

Instead of devastating Galveston and then moving over downtown Houston still packing the 100 mph winds of a Category 2 hurricane, a hurricane making landfall near Matagorda would be expected to roll over Houston with tropical force winds in the 70 mph range.

"The difference between that and making landfall in Galveston is huge," Prochazka said. Because of this forecast, Galveston city officials said they anticipate calling the island's first mandatory evacuation ever at 5 p.m. today. Galveston schools will be closed starting today, and evacuation buses are to begin rolling out of town this morning with hundreds or even thousands of people on board as shelters open to Galveston evacuees in Huntsville.

"You may and should begin to leave the island now," Galveston Mayor Lyda Ann Thomas said in Tuesday's online edition of the Houston Chronicle.

Sam Houston EC right-of-way foremen Tommy Clifton and Charles Morris were in the field Tuesday looking at potential trouble areas. While their crews have the rights-of-way under control, they understand high winds can damage not only poles and lines, but also cause trees to fall into the paths our Line Technicians use to make such vital repairs."

"We're getting crews together right now," Clifton said. "It's just a matter of where it hits now.

"As soon as we have our orders of where we need to go, we'll be in the field."

Construction Manager Bill Townley began making preparations to secure the various construction sites located throughout the service area while Branch Managers Charlie Palmer and Ricky Harrell began reviewing possible work schedules should Rita cause damage to the Co-op's electric distribution network. The Member Services department

has already made plans to staff the Call Center with 24-hour shifts as well.

Governor Rick Perry has recalled National Guard troops, emergency responders in Texas Task Force One, Forest Service workers and emergency equipment from Louisiana where they have been assisting with relief efforts from Hurricane Katrina.

He also ordered the activation of 5,000 Texas Army National Guard troops to support hurricane preparations.

Perry spokeswoman Kathy Walt said Texas National Guard troops will be staged along evacuation routes as officials better determine where the storm will strike land. FEMA said it is moving 45 truckloads of water, 45 truckloads of ice and eight truckloads of ready-to-eat meals to Texas. It also is positioning nine urban search and rescue task forces and nine disaster medical assistance teams in the state, officials said.

State and local officials urge coastal residents to make early storm preparations, including stocking up on nonperishable food and water, gassing up vehicles and getting cash in case ATMs are not working.

The Texas Department of Health and Human Services said it is ready to ensure water and ice distribution if a hurricane hits the coast, while the Texas Department of State Health Services said it is prepared to help communities evacuate hospitals and provide vaccines, medications and ambulances.

The Houston Chronicle and the Associated Press contributed to this report.
