



Consumer Bulletin

Braulio L. Baez, Chairman



Hurricane Season Is Here

The 2004 hurricane season imposed a tremendous personal and economic burden on Florida and its residents. Although the 2004 season is behind us, the 2005 hurricane season officially begins June 1 and extends through November 30.

This past season, Florida's electric, water, wastewater and telecommunications companies were challenged to restore services to millions of residents as quickly as possible which, in some cases, meant rebuilding large segments of their infrastructure. There is no way to predict what the 2005 hurricane season will bring, but history has taught us that preparation is essential. Some suggestions follow that may ease the burden somewhat should Florida experience hurricane landfall this season:

In the event of a loss of power:

Call your electric utility to report the outage – once. Don't jam a utility's switchboard with repeated calls, every few minutes or hours until service is restored. Electric utilities have response plans in place. These plans include defining the geographic scope of an outage, assessing what resources are needed to restore or rebuild a system, bringing those resources to affected areas, cutting power to downed lines, and moving forward with normalization activities. Typically, a utility will focus on restoring transmission and distribution lines first because they carry power from generating plants to customers.

Be patient. Each county's emergency management agency has established priorities for restoration. Once repairs to the electric system are complete, critical community services such as police, fire and rescue, and hospitals usually are among the first to have power restored, as are institutions that provide care to medically dependent individuals or individuals with special needs.

Be prepared. Have a supply of flashlights, batteries, candles, oil lamps or whatever else you may need to provide illumination. Portable generators may be an option for some. A general rule of thumb is to have supplies on hand sufficient to keep your home lit until you decide living without power is no longer viable. Wide scale power outages may also mean the loss of phone service – landline and wireless – and internet service. Have a radio capable of running off batteries to receive instructions and updates.

In the event water and wastewater service is compromised or disabled:

Again, be prepared. Have sufficient clean drinking water on hand prior to the storm season. Fill the bathtub when warnings of an approaching storm are broadcast. For drinking purposes, assume one gallon per day per person. In the aftermath of a storm, listen for boil-water alerts. Strong storms can severely damage a water or wastewater's infrastructure, rendering water unsafe for drinking purposes. Local emergency management agencies, which work with local utilities, routinely notify residents of the need to boil water if a system is compromised.

In the event phone service is lost:

◆ As mentioned previously, when power is lost, wireless handsets in the home will be inoperable because they rely on power from a wall outlet. A landline phone with a cord handset may continue to operate because the small amount of electricity needed to power the device travels down the phone line. If the telephone company's local office retains power or is running on generators, landline phones with corded handsets may remain in service. Wireless phones may or may not be operable depending on the extent of the outage and coverage area of the individual plan.

◆ Before a storm strikes, contact an out-of-state relative or friend to have them serve as the "family contact." Provide the family contact with a list of your friends and family members. If, after a storm strikes, phone service is available, notify the family contact of your circumstances and have them contact any concerned individuals.

◆ In the event an evacuation order is issued, the above suggestions become moot and residents should be prepared to leave their homes. Again, preparation is the key.

◆ Know the evacuation route for your area and keep your car fueled up in case an evacuation is ordered. Board up windows or protect them with storm shutters or tape.

◆ Have a ready supply of cash on hand. Familiarize yourself with your evacuation zone and the nearest evacuation center.

◆ If someone in your home is dependent upon electric-powered, life-sustaining medical equipment, check with your utility on backup facilities well in advance.

◆ Gather important papers together. Make sure life, health, flood and home insurance are up to date; keep paperwork in a safe, waterproof location.

◆ Bring in outdoor objects such as lawn furniture, toys and garden tools; anchor objects that cannot be brought inside.

◆ Avoid flooded roads and watch for washed-out bridges.

Braulio L. Baez is the Chairman of the Florida Public Service Commission. The PSC sets the rates regulated utility companies charge for natural gas, electric and telephone service within the state. In 36 counties, it sets the price you pay for the water you drink, if your water company is privately owned.