

County PIOs Explain How Their Counties Are Planning for Hurricane Season

Hurricane season officially runs from June 1 to November 30, and hurricanes and tropical storms threaten counties across South Carolina every year. Twenty-one named storms, seven hurricanes and four major hurricanes swept across the state during the 2021 Atlantic hurricane season.

All counties can sustain damage due to the high winds, heavy rains and tornadoes (cyclones).

But four counties bordering the Atlantic Ocean—Horry, Georgetown, Charleston and Beaufort—are particularly vulnerable to damage due to storm surges when hurricanes and tropical storms make their

landfalls along the coast. So, public information officers for these four counties were asked to explain how their counties were preparing for this year's upcoming hurricane season.

HORRY COUNTY

By Thomas Bell, Public Information Officer

Horry County is no stranger to hurricanes. This season was the first one in seven years where Horry County did not have to activate the county's emergency operations center for a tropical system (as of



writing this piece).

Horry County Emergency Management stands operationally ready at all times, but operates in a heightened state of preparedness starting in May as hurricane season approaches. Horry Emergency Management staff begins checking with partners within the county's municipalities, volunteer groups and state agencies to ensure everyone is on the same page for the season.

These pre-season touchpoints are critical to update partners about any logistical or operational changes. This can include changes to emergency operations functions, sheltering operations or if any new

staff need to be introduced to the appropriate contacts. The goal is to minimize any potential disruptions, questions or issues before Horry County is under threat from a tropical system.

At the same time all of this pre-season activity is occurring for Horry County Emergency Management, through the Horry County Public Information Department,

messaging on preparing for tropical threats is amplified both on social media and at in-person, educational presentations. The department is a consolidated structure of administrative, public safety, infrastructure and regulation communicators working together daily so when a tropical system is threatening Horry County, establishing a joint information center takes less time. The Horry County Public Information Department also takes inventory of its pre-scripted messaging and graphics to ensure everything is ready for quick dissemination as needed.

When it comes to specific plans for hurricanes, Horry County Emergency Management leans on past storm experiences, but recognizes that each storm is different. The department relies on its partners in and outside the county to coordinate and provide support, but also on the residents and visitors to follow directions of public safety officials and make preparations for incoming storms.

Horry County Emergency Management and Horry County Public Information work year-round to provide proper preparedness information so residents and visitors know what they need to do when a storm threatens the county.

With good communication, strong partnerships and experienced staff, Horry County stands ready for all hazards. Knowing the threat of a hurricane is the same for the county every year, regardless of how many storms are predicted in a season, keeps the county on standby to respond and recover as best it can.

In 2022, the county's capabilities for responding to tropical threats will be enhanced by the new Horry County Operations and Communications Center where the Horry County Emergency Operations Center and 911 call center will be housed.

Horry County was fortunate during the past hurricane season, but now it's time to focus on preparing for next year.

GEORGETOWN COUNTY

By Jackie Broach, Public Information Officer

The first day of Hurricane Season on June 1 seems like a long time away. But Georgetown County is already getting ready.

"We start in January," said Brandon Ellis, Georgetown County's director of Emergency Services and Emergency Management. "The season lasts six months, but hurricane preparedness is really a year-round operation for us. There isn't any down time."

The cycle begins at the start of the year with an annual review of the county's emergency operations plan, along with supporting plans. During this process, the county seeks feedback from supporting agencies that can be incorporated to any plan updates.

Then come coordination meetings with the S.C. Emergency Management Division and other agencies that assist the county during disasters. These groups all work together to ensure sheltering and transportation needs will be met, evacuation procedures are up to date and solidified, and that there are no gaps in planning when the next hurricane approaches.

"We always know it's a 'when' and not an 'if.' That just comes with living on the coast," Ellis said. "You know eventually you're going to get hit with a devastating storm. It could be 10 years from now, or it could be just around the corner. So, you always have to be ready and plan like it's happening tomorrow."

As hurricane season draws closer, Emergency Management begins public outreach campaigns. Georgetown County introduced a Build-a-Bucket campaign in 2021 to help residents build hurricane kits. These outreach events can be a refresher for those who have resided on the coast for many years.

But in an area with a high population of retirees and transplants, the campaigns can be the first taste for some folks of the threats that come with living in a coastal county. Many residents have never been through a major hurricane before. The county has to find ways annually to get new residents and veteran residents alike to take the threats of hurricane season seriously. It's also a hard task to get the public to stop equating the overall threat posed by a storm with wind speed. Even a Category 1 Hurricane or a tropical storm can cause major devastation through flooding.

"It's not all about wind," Ellis said. "That's the main misconception people have—they just focus on the wind. There are other things you have to look at. Hurricane Joaquin, which brought major flooding to Georgetown County in 2015, is an excellent example."

Before the season starts, the county also has to have "refresher training" for staff in the Emergency Operations Center, as well as individual planning workshops with municipalities, communities and first response agencies, such as the Sheriff's Office and Fire-EMS departments.

When the season actually begins, it is a continuous process of not

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only monitoring the Atlantic for tropical activity, but also continuing to review plans while still making sure the county is prepared for any other disaster or emergency that may arise.

“Then it’s over and we start all over again,” Ellis said.

CHARLESTON COUNTY

By Kelsey Barlow, Public Information Officer, and Taylor Green, Communications Coordinator

Charleston County’s Public Information Office knows it is never too early to begin preparing for hurricane season. Our office begins working with the county’s Emergency Management Department on preparedness campaigns each year in April.

By the time Atlantic hurricane season begins on June 1, our Public Information Office has already started sharing information

with residents via social media (Facebook, Twitter, Nextdoor, and Instagram) and the county’s website. Our office encourages the public to have a hurricane plan in place before the first storm is named.

Charleston County campaigns include preparedness videos, links to our hurricane guide, and connecting local media

with Emergency Management personnel.

The Lowcountry is now home to many who have never experienced a hurricane, so we make sure our annual campaigns include all aspects of hurricane preparedness. This includes reviewing evacuation zones and routes, preparing homes for a storm, building an emergency kit, and knowing where to find a local hurricane shelter.

Each year, the county holds a full-scale exercise in our Emergency Operations Center at the beginning of hurricane season, and the PIO invites the media to cover the drill. This way the public can see how seriously the county prepares for hurricanes.

Once a storm threatens the coast, our Public Information Office begins sharing updates with storm related information through news releases, social media, and charlestoncounty.org.

We work closely with Dorchester and Berkeley Counties, local municipalities, and law enforcement to give joint news conferences with the media. The county holds daily news conferences about the threatening storm until it is unsafe to travel to the Emergency Operations Center.

The Public Information Office then utilizes our social media outlets, radio partners, and Everbridge to share pertinent information with the community. Everbridge is a mass notification system used to get important information to residents who do not have social media or have lost their internet connection during the storm.

The county also provides a phone number connecting residents to a Citizen Information Line. Staff uses the line to disseminate important information and control rumors. All information is distributed in Spanish, and a deaf interpreter is present at all news conferences.



Fortunately, Charleston County has not had to activate the Emergency Operations Center in the last two years. However, our Public Information Office has continued a preparedness campaign throughout the 2020 and 2021 hurricane seasons. To ensure the safety of staff and our partners during the COVID-19 pandemic, the county is set to host virtual or outdoor press events to allow for social distancing.

We are always open to new and innovative ways to encourage hurricane preparedness.

This year, the Public Information Office worked with our floodplain manager to create several videos about readying properties for potential flooding, and our Emergency Management staff participated in a Latinx community event where they distributed hurricane guides in Spanish.

Charleston County’s goal is to provide every resident with the tools necessary to protect their loved ones and property in the event of a hurricane.

BEAUFORT COUNTY

By Laura Fanelli, Communications Manager

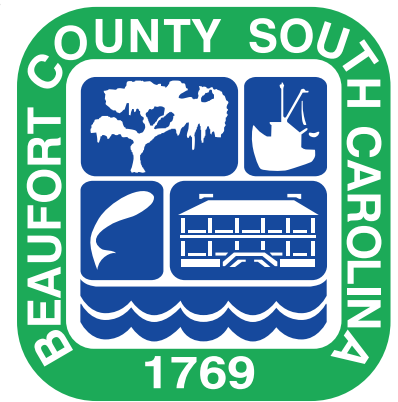
Media markets have fractured, and advertisements are expensive. Social media can be a cesspool for even the most positive message, and they seem to get lost among the cute cats and political banter. It seems essential topics like hurricane preparedness that could save lives get lost in the white noise.

Beaufort County Communications tackled the challenge last year by developing a hurricane preparedness information campaign, which began airing on multiple gas station pumps around the county about mid-way through the 2021 Hurricane Season. When residents and visitors filled-up at one of 17 contracted gas stations, a 30-second commercial created and produced by the Communications and Broadcast Services departments aired on the TV screen.

“It’s literally the only place you’re not allowed to use a cell phone. For those two minutes of pumping, we have a highly captive audience,” said Beaufort County Public Information Officer Christopher Ophardt. “I’ve seen the Kardashian videos updates so many times. Still, it just got us all thinking that this really can be a useful medium and a new way to get important messages to a mass of people.”

According to Gas Station TV, Beaufort County is the first in the state to contract with them for hurricane preparedness, family and pet evacuation.

“We’re pleased to partner with Beaufort County as its media partner for the Hurricane Preparedness campaign. We know that nearly 90 percent of people who visit stations with GSTV are paying attention to the content on our screens and offer us their undivided attention, so we’re honored to be a part of keeping Beaufort County safe by sharing these important messages with our South Carolina



viewers,” said Laura Bishop, Senior Vice President, Client Partnerships, GSTV.

The three hurricane preparedness spots, which ran from Sept. 1 to Nov. 30, began running after the first contract was signed with Gas Station TV.

The first spot focused on hurricane preparedness awareness. The spot reminded everyone to prepare their family, pets, and their home for an impending hurricane. Families were advised to create an evacuation plan, practice it if they had pets, start making an evacuation list for them, secure yard items, and plan a final evacuation location to stay for at least several days.

The second spot focused on evacuation with pets. It is against the county ordinance to leave pets behind, tied up, or running loose during a hurricane. It is considered cruel and abandonment. Some evacuation shelters don’t accept pets, so the spot recommended checking to determine if the shelter or hotel of choice was pet friendly.

Besides food, water, leashes, crates, medications, kitty litter, treats, toys, and other day-to-day supplies, medical information must be packed and identification included on the pet collars and leashes. Photos are helpful, too; in case Fluffy or Fido panic and escape, they could quickly be reunited with their humans.

The third spot focused on creating a hurricane preparedness disaster supplies kit. Items can include a first aid kit, flashlight, extra batteries, cash, phone charger, family and pet medications, important documents, and Ziplock bags. Every family needs to decide what’s best for their hurricane preparedness supplies kit and have it ready to go.

Beaufort County is experiencing explosive population growth. Many new residents (and visitors) have not experienced a hurricane in the Lowcountry, and the preparation must be done.

Hurricane preparedness spots, similar to those that ran last year, are scheduled to run during the entire upcoming 2022 Hurricane Season (June 1 to Nov. 30). These spots will help educate everyone on safety, family evacuation plans, pet evacuations, putting together an evacuation/disaster supply kit, and re-entry protocols.

In addition to the GSTV spots, an information campaign will be included on all of Beaufort County’s social media platforms. The information campaign will provide appropriate sources for information to follow before, during and after a hurricane, and the episodes will be rotated on The County Channel and County Channel Radio.

Residents and visitors will be encouraged to sign up for news and announcements at beaufortcountysc.gov, as well as NIXLE alerts through the Beaufort County Sheriff’s Office.

Once hurricane season ends, the spots will pivot to promoting county departments and programs such as mosquito control, available county jobs, capital projects, animal services updates, and more.



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