

Perspectives: Hurricane Floyd

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November 30, 1999, marked the end of hurricane season for the decade, century, and millennium in North Carolina. Those who work with families were glad to see the season end because it brought tremendous disruption to the lives of many North Carolina families. As an Atlantic coastal state, we are accustomed to threats from wind and water.

In a two month period, three named hurricanes pounded our state. Hurricane Dennis, arriving in early September with 105 mph winds, pounded our coastal counties for a week, dumping more than 20 inches of rain and leaving behind damages of \$40 million. Hurricane Floyd was not far behind. On September 16, the most costly natural disaster in North Carolina history began when Floyd came ashore. A monster hurricane, Floyd took the lives of 49 North Carolinians and affected more than one third of our state. It seemed that Floyd had barely gone when Hurricane Irene was upon us, causing heavy rains and new misery for areas still recovering from Dennis and Floyd.

Of the three hurricanes, Floyd was clearly the most devastating for our state. Estimates from the Office of the Governor place total projected damages between \$5 billion to \$6 billion. More than 43,000 homes were damaged or destroyed. We may not realize for some time the full impact of pollutants, chemicals, industrial waste, and human and animal waste which flooded into the many rivers and sounds in coastal North Carolina.

The affected counties in eastern North Carolina are significantly rural and rely heavily on agriculture to support families. Agricultural losses are expected to exceed \$2 billion. Poultry losses alone were more than one million birds. Farm families have lost their homes, their equipment and their means to feed their families and contribute to society. The cost of Floyd is measured in lives lost and lives displaced.

Significant natural disasters like earthquakes in the West, tornadoes in the Midwest and the terrible flooding along the Mississippi in 1993, bring out the worst and the best in people. In

North Carolina, we experienced some looting and scavenging, followed by the inevitable scams. But the outpouring of generosity from residents in the state and nation overwhelmingly made up for this. Individuals, churches, corporations, and non-profits came together in the days following Floyd and are still giving dollars, materials, and manpower to eastern North Carolina.

The North Carolina Cooperative Extension Service has been involved in all phases of disaster preparation, response, and recovery in our state. Floyd was different from any previous natural disaster in North Carolina. For two weeks entire towns and portions of major interstates were underwater, 1400 roads were impassable, two county Extension centers were completely destroyed, and another had significant water damage. Our county extension agents were heroes. They assisted with emergency management and rescue and went door-to-door to visit flood victims, assisted with recovery, and just listened to people's stories.

One County Extension Director with Family and Consumer Education responsibilities was able to pull from the web valuable disaster response and safety information, and had it printed and distributed to stricken counties within a few days. Agents in counties not affected by the flooding volunteered to make replacement sets of file materials and resources for the counties who had lost everything.

Within a few days after the hurricane struck, our Department organized a Floyd Relief Drive that soon became a college-wide effort, with much of the university community contributing as well. We filled a two-ton truck with food, water, and other necessities, and delivered it directly to one of the relief shelters in the east. We also initiated, through our college's Agricultural Foundation, a fund-raising program that has collected thousands of dollars for the Governor's Relief Fund and additional funds to assist Extension families affected by Floyd.

We visited several of the flooded counties, to see what agents needed. Our specialists put everything aside, responding in multi-disciplinary team efforts. They led site visits to counties, assisted agents with community meetings, developed requested resource materials and delivered them to agents in the east, located interpreters for counties with displaced Hispanic families. They even conducted a Grand Rounds for the East Carolina Medical College, helping health care providers from eastern counties become aware of health issues related to mold, mildew, and pests.

As a Department and program involved with families, we have been asking ourselves, "What worked well and what do we need to do differently the next time?" While Floyd was said to have brought a 500 year flood, some experts are saying that this could be the start of a "new era of hyperactive hurricane seasons that could last the next 20 or 30 years."[\[1\]](#)

Hurricane Floyd taught us that we need additional disaster response planning, multiple communication systems, and a way to inventory needs immediately. Our Department is committed to assisting agents and families through the estimated five-year recovery period. We will conduct a special week-long training focused on "Rebuilding Families and Communities." An Agent-Specialist team has been appointed to help design the training, provide guidance on revising our disaster handbook, assess immediate and future family and community needs, and help us prioritize programs to meet emerging needs. At our recent Extension Annual Conference, we brought all Family and Consumer Education Agents and Specialists together to debrief, share stories, and offer thanks for support and assistance given.

We are beginning a comprehensive assessment and planning process, so that when we face another natural disaster in North Carolina we will be both prepared and responsive.

Note 1. Violent Season Presages Future. *The News and Observer*. Vol. MCMXCIXI: 1. Nov. 30, 1999. [[Return to text.](#)]

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