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2003 HURRICANE SEASON ENDS SUNDAY

~State emergency management officials recount activity, widespread flooding ~

TALLAHASSEE— The 2003 hurricane season officially draws to a close on Sunday. State emergency management officials note that even though Florida was spared from the impacts of a major storm, 11 counties received a federal disaster declaration due to the tropical rains and flooding that occurred throughout the summer.

"This year will be remembered for the floods and tropical rains, rather than named storms," said Craig Fugate, director of the Florida Division of Emergency Management. "There are still some isolated areas where the water has yet to recede."

The season began well ahead of its June 1st start date, as Ana developed south of Bermuda on Easter Sunday and became April's first tropical storm on record. Tropical Storm Bill was the season's first storm to strike the United States. Bill made landfall along the eastern coast of Louisiana on June 30th, producing rip currents that claimed two lives in Panama City Beach. Heavy thunderstorms along Bill's eastern side spiraled onshore into the Panhandle and produced localized flooding from June 30th through July 2nd.

Hurricane Isabel weakened to Category 2 strength before making landfall along North Carolina's Outer Banks on September 18th. The National Hurricane Center's debut of its five-day forecast was consistently accurate for the most intense hurricane to strike the United States this season. Isabel caused over a billion dollars in damage along its path from eastern North Carolina northward to New York State. Florida emergency managers traveled to the mid-Atlantic region, providing recovery assistance and logistical support to North Carolina, Virginia and Washington, D.C.

Director Fugate noted, "The five-day forecast proved to be a great public awareness tool. It gave Floridians and visitors the ability to plan ahead and resume their summer vacation activities while enabling thousands of NC residents to safely evacuate the Outer Banks with minimal delays."

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A SUMMER SEASON OF FLORIDA FLOODING

Although Florida only felt the direct impact of one tropical storm, Henri, tropical moisture was repeatedly channeled into the state's peninsula throughout the summer. These rain events resulted from a trough of low pressure that produced moist, southwesterly winds from the Gulf of Mexico beginning in June.

The first wave of rainfall across west- central and southwest Florida began on June 18th and lasted until June 23rd. After widespread rains of 10-15 inches during this six-day period, the Manatee and Myakka Rivers and the Horse Creek reached record levels, with flooding affecting Sarasota County for weeks.

The daily downpours returned in August, prompting another round of widespread urban and river flooding in southwest Florida. Rainfall amounts of 5 to 10 inches again fell across the region from August 7-11th. Just as the area's rivers began to recede in early September, Tropical Storm Henri developed in the eastern Gulf of Mexico and came ashore near Tampa Bay as a weakened tropical depression on the morning of September 6th. Another round of heavy rainfall later in the month brought Fort Myers its wettest September on record.

11 Florida counties earned a Presidential disaster declaration after receiving over \$15 million in flooding damages. Estimated payments of \$6,154,000 will be made to localities by June 30, 2004.

The remnants of the season's final system, Tropical Storm Nicholas, moved across the state's peninsula in early November.

The 2003 season quietly ends with fourteen named storms, with seven reaching hurricane strength and three major hurricanes, Fabian, Isabel, and Kate. Hurricane Isabel became the first Category 5 hurricane in the Atlantic Basin since Mitch in October 1998.

"Although Florida was spared from the landfall of a major storm, many residents took the necessary steps to be prepared," said Director Fugate. "We applaud their efforts as well as the response from local counties to help insure that citizens were protected."

Now is the perfect time for all residents to take stock of their disaster supply kits, keeping in mind that canned goods and other items should be recycled, flashlights and batteries checked, replacing depleted supplies. Floridians should remain vigilant for all hazards, including severe weather threats and man-made disasters. Residents should maintain an adequate supply of necessary items, such as flashlights, batteries and a NOAA Weather Radio. The 2004 hurricane season starts June 1st.

For more information on the 2003 hurricane season or general disaster preparedness, visit www.FloridaDisaster.org

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