

SEPTEMBER 2019

# Hurricanes Leave Their Mark on Everyone

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Hurricane Dorian is working its way along our east coast at Category 2 after smashing the Bahamas as a strong Category 5. Florida appears to have gotten wildly lucky in that regard, since original projections included a mid-state Category 5 landfall, massive storm surge, rainfall and flooding. The entire state was already in a declared state of emergency and millions had expected to evacuate or ride it to the end. It is still not over, but the bad news does not look as bad as it did a few days ago. We have seen this before.

Fourteen years ago, a category 5 Hurricane Katrina was taking aim at Louisiana. New Orleans (NOLA) would be a total loss and the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) had reportedly ordered 100,000 body bags for the expected casualties. At the last minute, she veered northeast, sparing the city from a direct hit. Great news for NOLA. Not so great for Mississippi.



The celebration was short-lived. Though avoiding the worst of the storm, news of levee failures and flooding across NOLA came in almost immediately, and on August 30, 2005, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) received a Priority 1 (Lifesaving) Action Request from FEMA to “provide boats and crew to support critical life-saving transportation” for flood victims. The EPA accepted the request and, in my then position as a Federal On-Scene Coordinator, I was asked by our Regional Response Center in Dallas to lead the operation. FEMA immediately upgraded the Action Request to a Priority 1 (Lifesaving) Mission Assignment unprecedented for the EPA.

I headed for NOLA that afternoon, not knowing what to expect. My team was staged in a parking lot in Gonzalez, LA for the night, collecting our thoughts and resources and trying to plan for something unbelievable. No one got any sleep, and we headed for the water at around 0500 hours. We had no real sense of the best place to start, and our only guidance from the police checkpoints was to keep going until there were no lights and we saw water. That sounded useful until we discovered there were no lights for 40+ miles past Gonzalez, and there was water everywhere.

We ended up at the I-10/I-610 split in NOLA around daylight on August 31 and began working through the crowds of volunteers to join with the FEMA search and rescue Team Leader, part of a California group. The submerged ramps made excellent launch and retrieval points, and we were on the water after about three hours.

Stranded people were everywhere, and it was obvious that we needed many more boats and much more support. We pulled hundreds off the water that day, but the logistics were terrible. Travel distances were increasing, and the heat and humidity were brutal. Reports of shooting and fires were coming in from all over. We had almost no communications beyond visual. None of our people knew New Orleans, and certainly not with it under water. A woman we rescued said she saw one of my men shot in the head by a boat-jacker. Our crew and boat were recovered intact hours later when the boat was caught sneaking into the drop point and the new pilot trying to disappear into the crowd. This NOLA firefighter had jacked our boat at gunpoint, stranding my crew on a levee and taking the boat to rescue other firefighters from their flooded station. Apparently, our rescued woman saw a different person killed and his boat taken. Good news for us. Not so good for someone else. He was wearing a stolen EPA shirt to pass checkpoints and avoid interference from law enforcement while looting. It was a rough first day for everyone and worse for those who spent another night on the water or trapped in attics.

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It took only a day or so for the water to turn black, and the stench was relentless. Sun, heat and humidity punished everyone, rescuers and victims alike. Denials by government agencies and remotely-located spokespersons aside, shooting, looting, raping and killing were not in short supply. We had no force protection, and our people were operating at very high risk to their lives. The FEMA operation ran out of fuel within about two days and was having no luck getting more. At that point my EPA team had the only fuel available and supplied everyone from FEMA to the police for about two days. We lost only one tanker to armed bandits -- uniformed officers in a Parish Sheriff's car.

At the 0500 Operations briefing on September 3, 2005 a Coast Guard representative reported that two of his men had observed a "huge" oil spill in Chalmette, Saint Bernard Parish at the same time our search and rescue teams in that area were reporting oiled victims. The reported source was the Murphy Oil refinery located in the adjacent town of Meraux ("Mee-ro"), though flyovers of the facility on August 30, 2005 found no oil, only a submerged facility. The tank had floated and crashed into the containment wall, releasing over one million gallons of oil into the adjacent town, oiling over a square mile of homes and other properties.



The EPA operation was credited with over 1,200 rescues and all my people made it out relatively unscathed. At least physically. Those were hard times for everyone, and we need to appreciate that right now along the east coast and in the Bahamas, a lot of people are putting themselves in harm's way doing the same thing. Hopefully this time around it will go a little better for them if we have learned anything from previous events.

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## About the Author



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Dr. Scott Harris is the Associate Director of EHS Services in the Austin, TX office of GDS Associates and an adjunct faculty at University of Texas at San Antonio, University of Utah and UNC-Chapel Hill. A former U.S. EPA Federal On-Scene Coordinator, Scott held key roles in nationally significant response efforts including Space Shuttle Columbia, Hurricane Katrina NOLA water search and rescue, Murphy Oil, Enbridge Pipeline and Deepwater Horizon. Dr. Harris received his PhD in Environmental Science, with a specialization in Disaster and Emergency Management, from Oklahoma State University and holds degrees in Public Health and Geology from Western Kentucky University.



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