Building a Weather Ready Rio Grande Valley, One "Community" at a Time

Late August 2016 Outreach Prepares Businesses and Individuals

During ten days in late August, 2016, staff of NWS Brownsville/Rio Grande Valley spread out to reinforce the message of "ready, responsive, and resilient" to a variety of audiences that ranged from small businesses planning for catastrophic floods to highly vulnerable residents of *colonias* planning for any sort of natural disasters. The following three efforts reached hundreds directly, and hopefully thousands through over-air and web broadcast, just ahead of the peak of the 2016 Atlantic Hurricane Season.

Above: *Left* – Warning Coordination Meteorologist Barry Goldsmith describes how soil types unique to the Rio Grande Valley influence the ability of water to be absorbed. *Right* – Meteorologist-in-Charge James Reynolds participates in a panel discussion on how to develop a flood safety plan for business.

Ready Business Inland Flooding Workshop, August 17th

Ready.gov, the online preparedness arm of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, along with partners at FEMA and the Federal Alliance for Safe Homes (FLASH), conducted two ReadyBusiness Inland Flooding Workshops in Texas in August, 2016. The first workshop was held August 16th in Austin and covered *Strategies to Build Texas Resiliency.* The strategies included a dynamic agenda that updated damage trends and provided policy best practices for advancing disaster resiliency in Texas, from inland flooding to hurricane force winds. On August 17th, the "tour" shifted to the Rio Grande Valley, where workshop participants learned to identify their risks, develop a plan, and take action to mitigate potential impacts to inland flooding, the most common weather hazard to the region. The daylong workshop delivers modules focused on Staff, Surroundings, Space, Systems, Structure, and Service. More than 35 persons attended the event, hosted by the Lower Rio Grande Valley Development Council in Weslaco, including about half representing small businesses mainly in Hidalgo County.

Warning Coordination Meteorologist *Barry Goldsmith* and Meteorologist-in-Charge *James Reynolds* represented NWS Brownsville/Rio Grande Valley at the daylong workshop. Goldsmith spoke on identifying flood risk in the Valley, starting with a description of the somewhat impervious (but agriculturally rich) soils of the region, followed by a review of the different types of flood-producing events over the past decade, and concluding with suggested best practices for business risk assessment. Reynolds participated in an interactive panel which focused on the six "S's" of risk assessment and hazard mitigation (Surroundings, Staff, Space, Systems, Structure, and Service). His talk focused on *surroundings*, including the importance of drainage canals and systems that must be tended to prior to heavy rainfall to minimize flood impacts.

The conference ended with a scenario-based exercise (Table Top) which modeled a non-tropical cyclone flooding rain event exacerbated by precursor conditions of saturated soil and minimal drainage capacity, and the impacts that would occur on a large business facility that receives significant damage. ReadyBusiness Director of the Office of External Affairs, Private Sector Division, facilitated the exercise. Healthy discussion among all attendees followed, including common themes on information gathering, preparedness, safety and mitigation action, and post-event recovery. With the catastrophic flooding near Baton Rouge, Louisiana fresh on people's minds, as well as the October 2015 inundation in Weslaco, worst-case scenarios and relatable prior local events were discussed within the context of the exercise. Goldsmith provided a number of background information pieces to help attendees visualize and contextualize the threat.

Above: *Left* – Warning Coordination Meteorologist Barry Goldsmith interviews with Mark Hanna of the Insurance Council of Texas at KGBT CBS 4 News on the current state of the 2016 Hurricane Season and the importance of looking beyond the storm category in light of the unnamed flood disaster in Louisiana in mid-August 2016. *Right* – Senior Forecaster Mike Castillo discusses why "It Only Takes One" hurricane to make a season memorable, and why it's always important to prepare, to Spanish Language ratings leader Univision Radio. Also shown is Juan Padron of Safeguard Insurance of the Rio Grande Valley.

Insurance Council of Texas "Tour XI", August 26th

For the 11th consecutive year, the Mark Hanna of the Insurance Council of Texas joined local insurance representatives and NWS meteorologists along the entire Texas coast, from Beaumont to Brownsville, to reinforce the need for residents to check their insurance policies and hurricane awareness/preparedness just ahead of the peak of the Atlantic Hurricane Season in September. Four dozen interviews (live and taped) were conducted along the coast, which involved NWS offices in Lake Charles, Louisiana, Houston/Galveston, Corpus Christi, and the Rio Grande Valley. Nine of those interviews were conducted for Valley television and radio affiliates, including the following:

- KGBT Channel 4 (CBS 4 News), morning and noon live shows
- KRGV Channel 5 (ABC), midday Facebook Live and web recording
- KVEO Channel 23 (NBC), taped segment for the 5 and 10 PM evening news
- Univision Radio, en Español, taped 30 minute broadcast
- R Communications (710 AM KURV), taped segments for morning and afternoon drive
- Public Radio 88FM, taped segments and Public Service Announcements

This year's Valley tour focused on the usual "It Only Takes One" mantra, increasingly important since it had been six years since the last direct impact (Hermine) and indirect impact (river flooding/floodway operations from Hurricane Alex). Other talking points included the catastrophic flooding in Louisiana, which was not associated with a tropical cyclone but showed the power of tropical moisture in late summer, and the active Atlantic basin, which had one named cyclone (Gaston) and several disturbances at the time of the interviews.

Warning Coordination Meteorologist Barry Goldsmith (English) and Senior Forecast Mike Castillo (Spanish) covered all tour stops in 2016.

Above: Clockwise from Top: *Left* – Photo of invited speakers and VIP guests to the Conferencia de Emergencias Para Las Colonias Del Valle. *Top right* – Panelists Nat Flores (Cameron County), Rick Saldaña (Hidalgo County, speaking), and Warning Coordination Meteorologist Barry Goldsmith (NWS Brownsville/Rio Grande Valley) discuss the importance of vulnerable neighborhood preparedness. *Bottom right* – Goldsmith describing the close call that Hurricane Allen (1980) was to a Valley-wide catastrophic event. *Bottom left* – Crowd, which peaked near 100 and included neighborhood residents and community/church leaders, during the panel session.

Conferencia de Emergencias Para Las Colonias Del Valle, August 27th
The momentum for building a Weather-Ready Rio Grande Valley where needed most continued on a hot Saturday at the Primera Iglesia Bautista de Alamo (PIBA) in Alamo, Texas. More than 100 residents of *colonias* and other vulnerable neighborhoods showed up to learn everything from improving resiliency of

mobile homes (roof protection and anchoring), the meaning of disaster declarations, family health concerns during emergencies, short and long term evacuation plans, and how to cope during the recovery phase. The event, conducted mostly En Español to a rapt audience just prior to the peak of the 2016 Atlantic Hurricane Season, represented the purest example of why becoming "ready, responsive, and resilient" is the core of the NWS 21st Century mission. NWS Brownsville/Rio Grande Valley Warning Coordination Meteorologist Barry Goldsmith, with Spanish language assistance from Nat Flores (Cameron County), reviewed Hurricanes Beulah, Allen, and Dolly, three of the most impactful storms to the Valley in the fifty years and recalled by many for both wind damage to poorly built structures and long duration flooding (inundation). Goldsmith closed with the latest on the effort to engage Faith-Based leaders to assist colonia residents, most who attend local churches on a frequent basis, with education on how to communicate hazardous weather threats to these residents.   This effort includes a three-step process to ensure success:

- Educating clergy on Rio Grande Valley weather hazards and general meaning of warning services. The clergy then spread the word through training of lower level congregation and lay-leaders, who educate congregants, including many who live in vulnerable structures
- Providing NOAA Weather Radios to churches, community resource centers, and residents at little to no cost, and being proactive in guiding residents to listen for potential life-saving alerts in Spanish
- Working with churches to be proactive in opening their doors prior to the arrival of short-fused hazardous weather, such as local windstorms, hail storms, or floods, to allow colonia residents a safe and trusted haven to shelter in before such a storm could demolish the residents home(s).

"In just ten days in August, these events showed all the ingredients necessary to build a Weather Ready Rio Grande Valley," said Goldsmith. "The ReadyBusiness Inland Flood Workshop addressed the importance of the relationship between the Valley's number one hazard (flooding rain) and how employers and staff will build resilience at all stages of a significant flood event in order to improve outcomes and reduce costs. The 11th Insurance Council of Texas Hurricane Tour also focused on flooding beyond named storms, with Louisiana and Weslaco fresh in many minds. The emphasis on flood insurance for *everyone* was timely, since there are no "zero risk" areas in the Rio Grande Valley. Finally, seeing *colonia* residents nod in agreement about the proposal for local churches to become safe havens prior to potential deadly or injurious severe local storms might be the most gratifying feeling – knowing that there is real potential to save so many lives. Structures can be rebuilt; people cannot."