

Hurricane Ike in the Gulf of Mexico as photographed by the crew of the International Space Station from a vantage point 220 statute miles above Earth. Photo courtesy of NASA

Stormy WEATHER

Texas Gulf Coast contractors clean up after Ike

By Jack Sweet

As hurricanes go, it certainly could have been a whole lot worse...

Make no mistake; there have been bigger and badder storms than Hurricane Ike. But hurricanes, even relatively small ones like Ike, are why the English language needs words like, “awesome.”

Ike, the ninth named storm and fifth hurricane of the 2008 Atlantic hurricane season, came ashore in Southeastern Texas between Galveston Island and the Bolivar Peninsula Sept. 13 as a Category 2 storm [*Winds ranging between 96- and 110 MPH—Ed.*]

While serious damage wasn't particularly widespread as the storm lost energy over land, the city of Galveston bore the brunt of the meteorological assault—there was a mandatory evacuation before the storm hit, and residents were kept off the island and away from their homes until Sept. 24. Returning residents were faced with widespread power, telephone and gas outages along with flattened and water-damaged buildings and a daunting clean-up job because of all the debris typically left in a hurricane's wake.

Telephones there were still mainly not working a week after residents were allowed back onto the island. Most calls to the nearly 30 plumbing businesses on or very near Galveston Island were answered by a telephone recording apologizing because the numbers had, “been disconnected or are no longer in service.”

Some calls—like those placed to Lister Plumbing and Stewart Plumbing Service in Galveston—were picked up by the contractors' answering machines. The message at Lister Plumbing said the company had repaired most of its storm damage, but it had “an enormous backlog”

of service calls. Callers were invited to leave a message, but the recording suggested callers check with other companies in the area to see if faster service was available.

Stewart Plumbing's message said the company was taking calls for gas inspections and broken shutoff valves and those were the priority. “All other calls will be put after that,” the recording said. “We hope everyone is safe and welcome back to the island.”

APHCC Texas executive director Nancy Jones earlier said, although the Gulf Coast was hit hard by Hurricane Ike, “our members, as well as all of the licensed plumbers and HVAC contractors in Texas, immediately began reconstruction efforts in the area.”

Patty Frank of Milton Frank Plumbing in Spring, Texas, who is also chair of the PHCC's Quality Service Contractors, said there is a “tremendous” amount of work for contractors in the affected Gulf Coast area, and Texas contractors are “stepping up to the plate to do this work.”

Indeed they were. Kelly Stokes, the office manager for 62-year-old Mitchell Chuoke Plumbing in Galveston, said the company does mostly commercial work, with the nearby Moody Gardens resort, convention center and aquarium and the Schlitterbahn Water Park among its larger clients.

“We'll have to re-do all of the plumbing out there because everything was completely under water,” Stokes said. “All of the circuit boards and control panels were submerged as well, so everything has to be redone.”

Ike Cleanup

"It's a mess—you can't even explain how bad it is down there."—Kathy Grace, Grace Company Plumbing & Heating, Galveston, Texas



An aerial view of the damage caused by Hurricane Ike Sept. 13 around Galveston, Texas, U.S. Air Force photo/Staff Sgt. Corey Parrish

Another contractor that answered its Galveston phone number was Grace Company Plumbing & Heating. Actually headquartered in Santa Fe, Texas, about 20 miles northwest of Galveston, Grace Company suffered a bit of damage in the storm.

"Oh, yeah, we had trees hit our roof and stuff like that but it didn't knock any of the trucks out of business," said Kathy Grace, who added her job is in Galveston but she's taking a bit of an involuntary vacation and answering phones for her husband George's company in the wake of the storm.

"We're both Galveston people and there are no words for it. Plumbers [down there] are having trouble with trucks that got flooded," she said. "They're truckless...and they're phoneless. There's more work than there are workers. Everybody who has a gas meter that went under water—which is most of the island—has to have a plumber inspect it before it can be turned back on. Usually there are leaks. The houses in Galveston are so old that most of them don't pass the pressure test."

Even with the prodigious amount of work available in the area, out-of-state contractors who wish to lend a hand need to jump through a hoop or two before heading into the area and rolling up their sleeves. APHCC Texas' Jones said the Texas State Board of Plumbing Examiners and the Texas Department of Licensing and Regulation have issued regulations requiring out-of-state contractors to acquire a Texas plumbing or HVAC contractor license or register as an apprentice with the appropriate agency before engaging in any reconstruction work in the area: "These registrations will enable them to work under the supervision of a licensed plumber or licensed HVAC contractor," she said.

Even though Mitchell Chuoke left residential work in its past some 20 years ago, Stokes said the company's service crews were lending a hand on the residential side. "We are going out with our service crews and doing a 'Help Your Neighbor' type of deal," she said. "We're going through the neighborhoods, checking on people and asking anybody who's home if they need gas pressure or if they have anything we can do as a quick service call. And we're not charging for it."

Jim Ferguson is the general manager of the ARS Rescue Rooter outfit in South Houston, about 35 miles from Galveston but close enough to get about two percent of its regular business from calls on the island. Post Hurricane Ike, Ferguson said the company's service calls in Galveston have increased to make up about 10 percent of the company's business, with the most common work being checking out gas lines.

"We could [do more work there] if we had staffing. It could probably be 40 percent," Ferguson said. "What the city did was shut off everyone's gas and a plumber or other authority has to go out and deem it safe. That means permits and inspections on every single dwelling there."

While an out-of-state contractor technically can register as an apprentice and help out, ARS Rescue Rooter's Ferguson said apprentices need to be on the job with a Texas journeyman. "These really aren't two- or three-man jobs," he said. "A licensed guy has got to be at every home and make sure there aren't any leaks. They'll pressurize the system and, if it holds, it's good. If not, they start searching for leaks."

It's not that contractors from all over aren't willing to lend a hand, said Stokes, who said she was surprised by the offers that have been coming in to Mitchell Chuoke's office from all over the country.

"We've received calls from Florida, Georgia, and Oklahoma and we actually received one from Michigan," she said. "All of these out-of-state contractors were calling just to get an assessment of the situation for the residential and the commercial work and wanting to know contact information as to who they can talk to try and help any way they can."

So, at deadline—nearly a month after Hurricane Ike hit the beach in Galveston—people on the scene say it's hard to tell when life on the Island will get back to some semblance of normalcy. Stokes said some people who have been on the island for a long time hope to rebuild, since one storm over the period of time they've been on the island isn't going to deter them from coming back.

"People want to go back but there's always that apprehension about whether it could happen again," she said. "There is a lot of cleanup that still needs to be done."

Grace Company Plumbing & Heating's Grace agreed, saying there is some frustration among the population on the island as a result of the staggering volume of cleanup work still to be done.

"Right now it's about their gas meters. It's hard to find water heaters because all of them went under water. It's not any fun—it's not anything anybody wants," she said. "It's a mess—you can't even explain how bad it is down there." ■