

# Tree teams work to save South's storm-hit canopies

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## Urban Forest Strike Team

Hurricanes that whip the Gulf and Atlantic coasts of Southern states take a human toll, but they also claim another victim on an enormous scale - the majestic trees, many draped in Spanish moss, that form canopies over historic streets across the region.

Botanists call the oaks, cypress, magnolias and other trees that flourish in the hot, moist South the "bones of any landscape" and say visitors and residents alike cherish their look.

In the wake of Katrina, which brought down 1,800 trees in Mobile alone in 2005, foresters across the South decided to do something about the threat.

They formed "urban forest strike teams" in most Southern states to help communities evaluate and save damaged trees after a storm. They also provide guidance on what kind of trees to plant and how to prune them to reduce wind damage.

"We're right now talking about Baton Rouge, where a large area got hammered" by Hurricane Gustav on Sept. 1, said Eric A. Kuehler, a technology specialist with Athens, Ga.-based Urban Forestry South, a part of the U.S. Department of Agriculture. The teams will "look at hazard trees that didn't completely fail, but have cracks."

While debris removal begins almost immediately after a storm passes through, the urban foresters try to keep that cleanup from extending to trees that can be saved.

"After a storm people get chain-saw happy and cut everything down," Kuehler said.

Hurricane Ike forced a delay in making tree assessments in Baton Rouge. They're now slated to begin Sunday, with teams moving into Texas for Ike recovery when conditions permit, Kuehler said.

The strike team concept began when the urban forestry state coordinators from Virginia and North Carolina approached UFS after Katrina for help in creating a system to assess their community's trees, based on a model used in Mississippi and Louisiana for that hurricane.

"We initially trained 11 foresters from Virginia, six from North Carolina and one each from Alabama, Arkansas and Tennessee in 2007," Kuehler said. "This past year we trained foresters from most every other state in the Southeast as well as five from the Northern region."

The issue is important in the South, where historic port cities like Mobile and New Orleans treasure long-established tree canopies. Hurricanes Ivan in 2004 and Katrina the next year took a heavy toll.

"Along the Gulf Coast trees are an integral part of the regional landscape and their loss during and after the hurricanes was keenly felt," said Marion Drummond, director of Mobile Botanical Gardens. "They are the bones of any landscape, be it a private garden, park, street planting or public space."

Drummond said locals told her after the storms that they had never appreciated how much the trees meant and visitors said the trees were one of the things they enjoyed about the region.

Tree experts at a recent Mobile conference held by the Alabama Cooperative Extension System encouraged cities vulnerable to hurricanes to plant trees that can better survive high winds, such as live oaks, bald cypress and southern magnolias.

University of Florida tree expert Ed Gilman told the conference that research with a wind machine blowing at 120 mph, or the strength of a Category 3 hurricane, showed proper pruning can reduce wind damage but that the wrong pruning can make matters worse. "Hat-racked" and "overlifting" - too many bottom branches removed - are among the wrong ways to prune, tree experts say.

Foresters in states battered by hurricanes in recent years have received federal grants to replant, with some \$90 million for tree recovery going to Florida, Louisiana, Mississippi, Texas and Alabama after Ivan and Katrina.

"We have both a standing Urban & Community Forestry program which provides federal funding to all states each year, and occasional focus funding such as that after major disasters like hurricanes," said Steve Marshall of USDA's Forest Service in Washington, D.C.

The urban forest strike teams are designed to be run and deployed by the states. The teams work with municipalities and assess trees that could pose a threat to public lands or rights of way. Some hazardous trees may be growing on private property, but if they are a danger to public property, the team's arborists will alert the municipality about the trees. The municipality then will have to decide how best to mitigate the hazard.

Kuehler said that after Virginia and North Carolina foresters formed teams, "it kind of snowballed in the Southeast. We've got state certified arborists in the Southeast ready to be deployed."

On the Net:

Urban Forest Strike Team: <http://www.ufst.org>