

Emergency Preparedness

Between oil spills and hurricanes, Gulf Coast self storage businesses need to be ready.

By John Dunlap – Editor, SSA Globe

The news that comes from the Gulf of Mexico these days can often be hard to bear, even for those of us who live far, far away. A major oil spill that does huge environmental damage to the ocean and its occupants causes us to grimace. A major hurricane like Katrina that nearly destroys one of America's greatest cities tugs heavily on our hearts. So imagine what life must be like for self storage businesses located at or near the Gulf Coast areas of Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, Florida and Texas. Being prepared for emergencies is almost a annual ritual.

The BP oil spill did damage to communities in more ways than environmental. It put many fishermen out of work for a while and kept tourists away from popular beaches, impacting hotels and restaurants dependent upon that income. And, yes, a number of self storage facilities were affected by customers who were suddenly without income and unable to pay their bills. Hurricanes, on the other hand, not only do damage to people and their homes, but can take their toll on self storage facilities.

So how have the self storage professionals in places like Louisiana and Mississippi dealt with these crisis scenarios and how are they preparing for future trouble?

First and foremost, the fallout from the BP oil spill didn't seem to affect the self storage business as much as one might think. The one area of concern has been the people (mainly fishermen) who have been out of work while the cleanup has been in effect. Their ability to pay their bills has been severely hampered and a number of self storage facilities contacted in Louisiana and Mississippi all said that helping those people structure their payments has been a top priority.

“When families are in need of help in times of trouble, we do the best we can to help them out,” says Ronald Fermin of Fermin Climate Control Mini Storage LLC in New Iberia, Louisiana. “People shouldn't be taken advantage of at times like that. We've offered those people put out of work half-price for six months while they adjust.”

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Bob Vaughan of Pass Road Mini Storage in Gulfport, Mississippi.

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“The oil spill didn’t affect us directly,” says Bob Vaughan of Pass Road Mini Storage in Gulfport, Mississippi. “But the fishing industry is big in this area, so we were indirectly affected because people were put out of work. The tourism industry was very hard hit by the spill and the economy was already not as good as we’d like, so the end result is that we were affected to some degree.”

Hurricane Alley

When one thinks of emergency preparedness in Kansas or Oklahoma, it might be for tornadoes; in Minnesota or North Dakota it would be winter blizzards. But in Louisiana and Mississippi, the prime culprit is hurricanes. It has now been five years since one of the worst hurricanes of all time, Katrina, smashed into the area, leaving total devastation and flooding in its wake.

“Around here, it used to be we talked in terms of BC and AD, but now it is ‘BK’ and ‘AK,’ Before Katrina and After Katrina,” adds Vaughan. “We had a waiting list for people to rent our units for a year after Katrina. It took us close to that long to be back on solid footing ourselves because Katrina destroyed 100 of our units.”

When asked if Pass Road Mini Storage could have done anything different to be ready for Katrina, Vaughan says “I don’t think so. It was just too powerful.”

That said, Vaughan is now building 110 new units on the front part of the property and “we have higher wind load requirements for these buildings than before, so they should do well in any future hurricanes.” Vaughan also says that when future hurricanes are headed his way, “It might be worth reminding the people of Gulfport that we are here and they can store their valuables before the storm hits instead of waiting until afterwards.”

A big problem for Vaughan has been the fact that, AK, a large part of the population base moved out and has not returned. “A few people are trickling back, but not as many as we’d like. I’m taking a big gamble adding these new units.”

Knowing the Drill

For Fremin, being prepared for hurricanes is almost as routine as making sure his climate controlled units are functioning properly. Part of it comes from his father (Ronald Fremin, who is called “No. 1”) who was in self storage for nearly 40 years and was one of the first to

bring the business to Southern Louisiana. The other part comes from Fremin (“No. 2”) being a contractor, as well, and knowing what to do to be ready for a hurricane.

“Including Katrina and hurricanes Ike and Gustav, the Lower Iberia Parish has been severely flooded twice,” he says. “There has been over three-feet of water flooding each time. When they happened we have made sure to have extra space available to local people so they can bring the things that matter most to them to store. The idea is to help them salvage their goods and not lose the equity



“I built my facility above Highway 90, which is a sort of levee in this area. It is a couple of feet above the floodplain.”

*~ Ronald Fremin
Fermin Climate Control Mini Storage LLC*

that is built upon those goods. And, of course, we offer six-month specials.”

The contractor side of Fremin also understood the need to strategically place his facility where flooding from hurricanes wouldn’t be a problem.

“I built my facility above Highway 90, which is a sort of levee in this area,” Fremin adds. “It is a couple of feet above the floodplain.”

His 300 units also include two buildings that have a roof that bridges the two buildings, allowing customers to drive up to unload their goods protected from the rain and wind.

“Since I’m also a general contractor, I try to think through all the possible angles of what our customers need and be prepared for emergencies,” Fremin says. “We’ve made sure that our buildings are up to the latest codes for wind resistance and can easily handle hurricanes of up to 120 mph.”

He also makes sure that his community knows both his and his father’s facilities are there to help.

“My father has over 2,000 units and I have the 300, so we can help accommodate a lot of people in our region when emergencies crop up,” Fremin concludes. “We also can help them, labor-wise, when they need to offload their items either before or after storms.”

In short, Vaughan and Fremin have seen the damage that mother nature (and people) can do and are doing everything they can to help the people in their areas be prepared—before, during and after. ❖