THE DAILY CLIPS

September 3, 2008

News, commentary, and opinion
compiled by the East Carolina University News Bureau from:

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NWS: Pitt to be east of the storm

BY JOSH HUMPHRIES

Tropical Storm Hanna is expected to pick up strength and become a category one hurricane before making landfall in southern South Carolina on Friday.

Meteorologist Robert Frederick, of the National Weather Service in Newport, said the storm will then decrease in strength as it travels across South Carolina and be reduced to tropical storm strength by the time it hits North Carolina late Friday or early Saturday.

The storm is expected to move across the central part of North Carolina late Friday and early Saturday, with the worst weather for Pitt County occurring at that time.

Frederick said the right side of the storm, the part that will likely come through Pitt County, will produce winds up to 20-30 mph, but the brunt of the storm will likely be west of here.

"The strongest conditions will be inland west of eastern North Carolina," Frederick said.

Forecasters are calling for isolated tornadoes on the right side of the system.

Still, Frederick said it's too early to predict the storm's path; it may make landfall along the coast of North Carolina.

East Carolina University officials are keeping a close eye

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on Hanna in anticipation of a busy weekend with the home football opener Saturday against West Virginia.

ECU spokesman John Durham said that officials met Tuesday to discuss possible actions if the storm affects Greenville.

"Everything looks good right now for the scheduled 4:30 p.m. kickoff for the football game against West Virginia in Dowdy-Ficklen Stadium," Durham said. "We are not expecting any changes in the game schedule at this point."

Durham said there are no expected restrictions to tailgating around the stadium for Saturday's game, though rain may limit the number of people participating in the pre-game ritual.

Durham said the university's hurricane planning group, made up of officials from all departments, met Tuesday and will meet again today.

"We continue to keep a watchful eye on the storm predictions," Durham said.

The university has standing plans with a detailed outline for handling storms, Durham said.

Officials can communicate with students in the case of any emergency through a variety of methods, including e-mails, text messaging and new video message boards on television screens in each residence hall and dining facility on campus.

Pitt County Schools officials also are monitoring Tropical Storm Hanna as it approaches.

Spokeswoman Heather Mayo said the district works closely with county emergency management officials before making any decisions regarding schools closings.

"We are still monitoring the storm very closely," Mayo said.

Mayo said school officials watch for alerts from the National Weather Service when a storm is approaching the area.

Schools practice hurricane/tornado drills at least once a year during severe weather week, a statewide event, Mayo said.

Each school is equipped with weather alert radios in the office or the media center where someone at the school can hear them at all times, Mayo said.

"Hurricanes generally provide enough warning that schools would be closed," Mayo said.

Pitt County Emergency Management Director Noel Lee said Tuesday that county officials are beginning to discuss the possibility of activating plans.

"Right now we are looking at whether this event will be large enough to open up shelters, whether we would ask for voluntary evacuation of low-lying areas and mobile homes and there could be school closings," Lee said.

"There is a whole gamut of things that could affect the safety and well-being of the citizens of Pitt County. But the storm is not giving us a predictable track or intensity to make any of those decisions."

Lee said that officials are just now in the first phase of planning by making contact with all the different agencies associated with storms.

Pitt County emergency officials have a lot of experience responding to hurricanes, Lee said.

Shelters have been opened twice since Hurricane Floyd devastated the area in 1999, but people did not stay in the shelters after the storms passed.

Lee said everyone should be prepared with a three- to five-day kit when water or electricity may not be available.

"The biggest thing, everybody should be prepared," Lee said. "There could be situations where homes are not damaged but electricity may be out. During this time we preach being prepared."

Lee said everyone should have plans for what they will be doing during a storm, especially in low-lying areas and mobile homes.

"We encourage everybody to maintain a watch with weather stations to keep abreast of what the storm activities are," Lee said.

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Centers to study U.S. security

RTP, UNCG sites hailed as putting area at front of homeland security efforts.

By Jay Price

Research Triangle Park — In just three hours Tuesday, the Triangle became a national powerhouse in homeland security research.

In separate events in RTP and Chapel Hill, government and university officials unveiled a pair of new groups that have won more than $22 million from the U.S. Department of Homeland Security for research projects in the next few years, many of them at local universities.

First came the announcement of the Institute for Homeland Security Solutions at a morning news conference at Research Triangle Park's headquarters. Then, in early afternoon, came the dedication of the Center of Excellence for the Study of Natural Disasters, Coastal Infrastructure and Emergency Management, which is based at UNC-Chapel Hill.

"I think this very decisively announces to the rest of the country that the Triangle has arrived as a center of homeland security research," said U.S. Rep. David Price, who spoke at both events.

In his role as chairman of the Homeland Security appropriations subcommittee, Price got the Institute of Homeland Security a contract with the homeland security department. Meanwhile, a team led by veteran UNCG marine researcher Rick Luettich won the grant for the UNCG-based center in a competitive process.

The importance of the research involved was underscored Monday by Hurricane Gustav's assault on the Gulf Coast. Luettich, a leading expert on storm surge modeling, had been working for the past three days with state officials in Louisiana, federal leaders and other researchers to track the potential dangers.

Luettich said he envisions the center tapping a wide range of disciplines. It will advance the ability to model storm behavior, but also will study things such as better ways to build structures and plan waterfront communities so that there is less storm damage.

Some overlap is likely in the two groups' work — leaders of both have been meeting — but the institute at RTP will emphasize issues related to terrorism, Price said, while the center at UNCG will focus on traditional disasters such as hurricanes.

Crucial for the Foundation

The N.C. Military Foundation, which was started to lure more defense industry money to the state, came up with the idea of the Institute. Lt. Gov. Beverly Perdue, who helped start the military foundation, was among those at the announcement.

RTI International will act as the prime contractor for the institute, which will distribute grants for research into such things as the social roots of terrorism and improving government response and recovery efforts in natural disasters.

Perdue said the results of the institute's work could be crucial for the future not just of North Carolina but also the nation and the world. She called the institute a competitive advantage and said that it would complement the state's reputation for being friendly to military bases and defense-related industry.

"The marker we're laying down today is that we also have become a powerhouse in homeland security," she said.

The Homeland Security contract runs through 2010, but it could win more money from the department and other sources.

"We see it as seed money to get us started and to let us demonstrate what a useful resource this will be for them," said David Schanz, head of the Triangle Center on Terrorism and Homeland Security and co-director of the new institute.

The federal funding for the institute is a sign the government has realized that the problems of homeland security aren't going to be solved entirely with new technology, Schanz said.

"For example, we don't really understand why people engage in violent behavior," he said. "There are many people who are angry or have certain political beliefs, but only a very small number take violent action, and we need to understand why they do so before we can prevent it."

Another illustration of the kind of research the institute will take is the roots of why victims in a natural disaster behave as they do, Schanz said. If there was a better understanding of why people refuse to evacuate, for example, that may suggest better ways of motivating them to leave.

"The best of the best"

Speaking at both events was Jay Cohen, undersecretary for science and technology at the Department of Homeland Security. Two such events on the same day is a credit to the state, Cohen said in an interview.

"If you look around the country, there are many industrial parks, there are many universities and several research parks, but it's been my experience that no state puts it together as well as North Carolina can," he said. "We wanted the best of the best in these two cases, and we've picked very well. And these aren't short-term commitments."

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