

Georgia's Urban Forestry Strike Team Helps Communities Affected by Hurricane Michael

Hurricane Michael made landfall as a Category 4 hurricane on the Florida Panhandle on October 10, 2018, moving rapidly inland. The storm swept through Georgia on October 10 and 11, generating wind gusts as high as 115 mph in the southwestern part of the state. The winds caused widespread tree damage and power outages, as well as severe damage to cotton and pecan crops.

The damage was so extensive in Georgia that the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) brought in the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (Corps) to handle debris removal. The Georgia Emergency Management Agency (GEMA) made a specific request to the Georgia Forestry Commission's Urban Forest Strike Team (UFST) to address leaning trees (leaners) and dangerous hanging limbs (hangers) in public areas such as schools and parks in the 13 counties designated for disaster assistance.

UFSTs in the southern states resulted from a disaster response and recovery project initiated in 2007 by the Urban & Community Forestry (U&CF) programs in Virginia and North Carolina and are supported by the Southern Group of State Foresters. The Northeastern and Midwestern states have also formed teams based on the UFST concept; the three regional programs each operate as a single program with shared resources among their constituent states. The primary objective of the UFST project is to develop state and regional capacity to address disasters by providing comprehensive urban tree assessment training to state agency arborists and urban foresters. The teams work in communities after hurricanes, ice storms, and tornadoes to assess damaged trees according to FEMA guidelines.



Credit: Georgia Forestry Commission



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After Hurricane Michael, six members of the Georgia UFST spent seven days traversing southwestern Georgia doing assessments of leaners and hangers on public property. They summarized their findings in a report that was used by the Corps in cleanup and recovery operations.

Joan Scales, member of the Georgia UFST and coordinator for the GFC Sustainable Community Forestry Program, noted that many of the communities affected by Michael lost most of their tree canopy coverage, which will have major effects on southwestern Georgia communities for a long time to come, in terms of losses of shade, energy savings, and multiple environmental benefits.

After storms like Michael, UFST members use readily available mobile technology in conjunction with geographic information systems (GIS) to

categorize trees according to FEMA protocols, with data collected on location, species, diameter, and remedial action needed, with special emphasis on trees that pose a risk to the public. The team physically marks trees identified for removal or pruning for easy identification by removal crews.

"The strike team not only identifies trees that pose a threat to public safety and should be removed, but also trees that can be saved to preserve the benefits they provide," said Scales. "Many storm-damaged trees can just be pruned rather than removed, but in many cases the contractors in charge of removing storm-damaged trees have not been trained to identify which trees pose a risk and which do not."



Credit: Georgia Forestry Commission

While the strike team's Hurricane Michael mission focused specifically on public property, the Corps also requested assistance with clearing trees on rights-of-way. The hundreds of miles of affected roads were beyond the resources of the UFST team, but team members were able to train key members of the Corps staff to efficiently identify and evaluate trees that represented risk along the streets and county roads. Tara Teuta, a grants specialist in the Public Assistance Division with GEMA, coordinated the UFST "train-the-trainers" session with 12 Corps staff members.

"There's strict guidance under the FEMA policy on which trees should come down," said Teuta. "UFST members know FEMA policy well and are good at training others to understand and implement it."

Spencer Roylance, a geographer with the Corps, participated in the training and found it tremendously helpful for understanding how to categorize damaged trees. "It's a great strategy for doing this type of damage assessment using mobile technology," said Roylance. "They did an outstanding job."

Date Prepared

Mar 22, 2019