

# County Girds for Nasty Weather

Equipment readiness for rapid deployment is essential.

**T**he Public Works Department of Tuscaloosa County, AL, has a big job on the best of days—maintaining 1,200 miles of paved roads, 600 miles of gravel roads, and hundreds of bridges. But when the weather turns nasty—when a tornado or hurricane threatens to rip through the area—the job gets even tougher, because public safety is now at risk. The focus of the department becomes pinpointed on restoring critical transportation services.

Obviously, says Michael Henderson, engineering coordinator for the department, public works must anticipate these natural disasters and be prepared to deal with them. Doing so, however, he says, requires a disciplined approach that takes note of the details.

“We’re always monitoring long-range weather forecasts,” says Henderson, “and if we see the potential for a hurricane, tornado, or other severe weather, we begin to anticipate when—and

where—the storm might hit, and how extensive damage might be.”

As the potential crisis nears, says Henderson, the department attends briefings at the Emergency Management Agency, often two or more times per day, to keep current on storm specifics (rainfall amount and wind intensity, for example) and to coordinate with other emergency-response units and county officials, including the sheriff’s department, Red Cross, utility companies, ambulance services, and school administrators.

## Getting ready

Back at public works, the department’s equipment shop makes certain that machines to be used for after-storm clean-up receive any required service and are ready to be deployed to those spots in the county’s 1,351-sq mi area expected to be hardest hit. The day before the storm’s anticipated arrival, the

machines are moved out, typically a fleet of four Caterpillar 420E backhoe-loaders, two Caterpillar 950G wheel loaders, and a pair of Caterpillar 325D L hydraulic excavators.

When the storm is imminent, Henderson hits the road in a pickup, constantly in radio contact with emergency crews that are assessing where the worst damage is occurring.

As soon as the danger has passed, says Henderson, police help dispatch public works crews to the most critical spots, such as where downed trees or parts of structures are blocking roadways. The crews usually are accompanied by the power company to deal with downed lines, and the police or National Guard handle traffic control, thus assisting the public works machine fleet when maneuvering in clean-up areas. The fleet first pushes debris off roads to keep emergency traffic moving, and when trucks can be moved in, loading begins, facilitated by hydraulic-thumb-equipped buckets on some of the machines. If clean-up is extensive, additional equipment may be rented and outside operators hired.

## Basic Preparedness Check List

- Monitor weather forecasts to determine the potential time, location, and severity of the storm.
- Stage equipment near the areas where storm damage is expected to be worst.
- Meet with other agencies before the storm strikes to clarify responsibilities.
- Communicate with these agencies during the storm to best utilize collective resources.

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*Tuscaloosa County moves its equipment into the field the day before a storm’s anticipated arrival, including one of two Caterpillar 325D L hydraulic excavators.*