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BURNING ISSUES

PHONE TIPS FOR HURRICANE SEASON

Last year, after Hurricane Katrina devastated the Gulf Coast and as Hurricane Rita gained strength and made its way toward Texas, wireless phone companies mobilized an emergency operations team to help ensure the problems residents faced just weeks earlier in the Katrina aftermath would not be duplicated. Wireless phone companies conduct ongoing readiness drills throughout the year and have rigorous emergency preparedness and response process in place for these types of natural disasters.

“Wireless phones are often the only line of communication for many people during and after hurricanes, and we want consumers to know what they can do to maximize the use of their device during a storm,” said Andy Shibley, Vice President and General Manager for a Wireless Company in South Texas. “We have the necessary emergency resources in place to quickly respond and are prepared for what [the hurricanes] may bring.

“One top recommendation that was validated when Hurricane Katrina hit was that people should text message rather than try and make voice cell calls. Text messaging uses far less bandwidth, and experience has proven that people are more likely to get through with text messaging. When additional people attempt to make voice calls at the same time, it adds congestion to the network, which can block calls from getting through. That doesn’t happen with text messaging.”

With 2006’s hurricane season now under way, and early predictions calling for 17 named Atlantic storms — including nine hurricanes — Remember these important tips:

- Program all emergency contact numbers into your wireless phone. Store numbers for the fire station, police department and hospital, as well as your family members so you don’t have to think about it during and after an emergency.
- Have a family communications plan in place. Designate someone out of the area as a central contact, and make certain all family members know who to contact if they become separated.
- Keep your wireless phone batteries charged at all times. Use your car charger to charge your wireless phone when power is out, or pick up a disposable battery that will give you an hour of talk time without any charging.
- Keep your wireless phone dry and protected. The biggest threat from hurricanes is water — versus wind damage — so keep your equipment safe from the elements by storing it in a plastic sandwich or freezer bag.
- Forward your home phone number to your wireless number in the event of an evacuation. Since call forwarding is

based out of the telephone central office, you will get incoming calls from your landline phone, even if your local telephone service is disrupted at your home. In the unlikely event the central office is isolated, call forwarding may not work.

- Consider additional cell phones for your family’s use. If you want to add additional cell phones to your wireless service, remember to do so prior to the emergency.

Staying in touch and maximizing your wireless service during an after an emergency:

- Try text messaging or SMS (short messaging service). Most wireless phones today are text-messaging capable, and often during an emergency situation such as a hurricane, text messages will go through quicker than voice calls. More importantly, using text messaging helps free up the voice lines for emergency officials.
- Use a landline phone if it is available. In many instances, landline service may still be available in your area, so this may remain an option.
- Keep non-emergency calls to a minimum. Remember to limit your calls to the most important ones. Chances are that if there is severe weather, many people will be attempting to place wireless calls as well. If the landline phones are not working, this probability increases.
- Wait 10 seconds before redialing a call. On many wireless phones, to redial a number you simply push “send” after you’ve ended a call to redial the previous number. If you do this too quickly, the data from the phone to the cell sites does not have enough time to clear before you’ve resent the same data and may contribute to network congestion.
- Use your wireless phone to access weather information. Many homes lose power during severe weather. If you have a wireless phone that provides access to the Internet, you can watch the Weather Channel.
- If you have a camera phone, take, store and send photos of damaged property to your insurance company from your device.