

Response team formed to handle emergencies in Pickens County

BY GREG OLIVER
THE JOURNAL

PICKENS COUNTY — Although plans were already in the works, Pickens County Fire Chiefs Association president Ed Reynolds said the tornado that struck the Norris area last month was a visible reminder of the importance of establishing a countywide emergency response team.

"We're working on a personal response team now for when we have a community event like that," said Reynolds, who serves as chief of the Central Fire Department. "If this were in place now, we would have activated them, so the response would have been from all over the county instead of one area."

Reynolds said he has appointed five people to

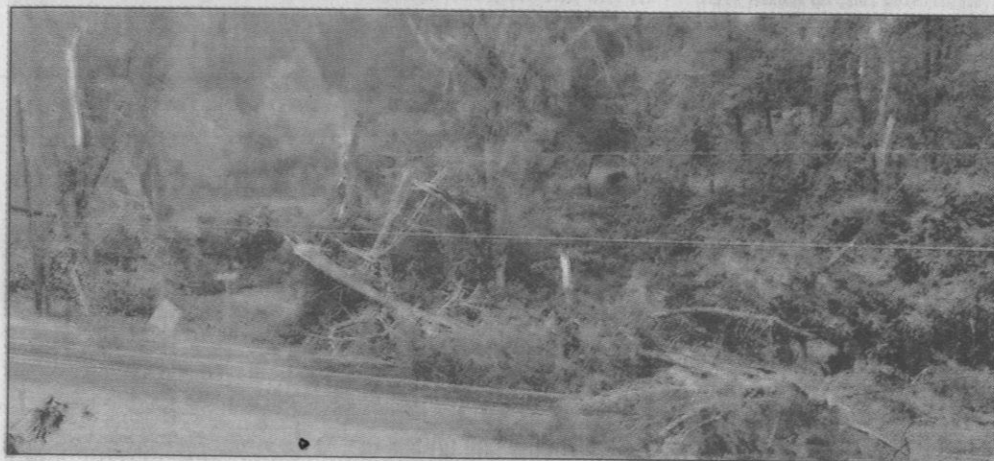
serve on the team: Pierce Womack of the emergency operations center; Liberty Area Fire District Lt. Elijah Reynolds; Billy Gibson of Pickens; Pickens County Emergency Services director Scott Smith and Kevin McLane, deputy director of fire and life safety for Pickens County.

"We could have had some of the roads open a lot quicker (in the Norris/Liberty area), and they could have identified homes without power and cut trees," Reynolds said. "We will get set up with Duke Energy operators and get this going. They're already appointing someone, and I'm hoping to have it in place by the end of the year."

Reynolds said it is a miracle no loss of life or major injuries occurred as a result of the Oct. 8 tornado. The tornado was

confirmed by the National Weather Service to be an EF-2 with 130 mph winds, and it traveled 8.43 miles.

"How nobody got hurt, I'll never know," he said. "We talked to four or five different homeowners and they said they decided to go somewhere that day so they were lucky they weren't home. It's going to be one of the top storms in Pickens County for years, and there was also so much debris on the road and so many trees down. Workers had to go in and clear a path 30 feet wide, and Blue Ridge Electric Cooperative did a good job of identifying trees by saying 'this one's dead, cut this tree down.'"



Trees downed on Robinson Bridge Road in Liberty were another visible reminder of the tornado that struck the Liberty and Norris area of Pickens County last month.

Elijah Reynolds said the storm team committee's goal is to come up with standard operating guidelines for Pickens County, including law enforcement, EMS and fire, in the event of any storm or natural disaster.

"We want to make sure that every agency is on the same page as far as preparedness, assessment and recovery," Elijah Reynolds said. "We want to have plenty of staffing on hand while also making sure we have the right equipment to deploy in any circumstance. While

we feel we did a great job managing Hurricane Irma and Nate, we also feel we could do an even better job with everyone operating off the same guidelines."

Smith said the goal is also to ease the influx of calls that come into the dispatch center by developing guidelines.

"Some municipalities have a storm mode operation, getting additional people in the communications center to handle calls,"

Smith said. "Right now, if someone calls in about a tree down or power line, we tone out as an emer-

gency call. But when you have the magnitude of trees falling from the tornado or when Hurricane Irma came through, it's not necessary to activate the tones for every area."

Denise Kwiatek, director of emergency management for Pickens County, said having a storm mode operation procedure will enable resources to be put where needed the most during times of emergency.

"If there's a tree down and a power line in it or a resident doesn't have power and needs help, those are things we're looking to identify," Kwiatek said. "Dispatch can transfer those calls to us and take extra pressure off of them."

Kwiatek said discussion of a storm mode had been taking place at least as far back as Hurricane Irma.

"We had already kind of implemented it but needed to have an official storm mode policy in place so that whenever the next storm is, this is how we're going to process incoming calls and help residents," she said. "We're just trying to get a better response to citizens who need it."

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Elijah Reynolds
Pickens County emergency response team member



PHOTOS SPECIAL TO THE JOURNAL

Damage to a home on Liberty Highway in Liberty was one of the results of an October tornado that struck portions of Pickens County. A countywide emergency response team is being formed in an effort to give officials a better handle on similar events in the future.