

# Prepare Your Forest Property for Hurricane Season<sup>1</sup>

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Hurricane season is June 1 through November 30. As we have learned in recent years, powerful hurricanes can make their way inland and do considerable damage to forest lands and agricultural enterprises. It's never too early to start planning for a hurricane that could negatively impact your forest land. While there is no way to fully prepare in advance for a direct hit from a Category 4 or 5 hurricane, there are some strategies to make your property resilient and steps you can take to recover from a storm more quickly.

## Connect with Professionals

Don't go it alone. There are resources and services available to help with your land management activities, and these connections can give you a leg up in the event of a hurricane or other natural disaster. Assistance is available from professional foresters, The University of Florida Land Steward Program, Florida Forest Service, USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service and Farm Service Agency.

In particular, get to know your UF/IFAS county Extension agent (<https://ifas.ufl.edu/maps/>) and Florida Forest Service county forester (<https://www.fdacs.gov/Forest-Wildfire/Our-Forests/Field-Operations/County-Foresters/Find-a-County-Forester>). They can provide valuable management assistance and will be knowledgeable about local recovery efforts, workshops, and available assistance after a hurricane. The University of Florida's Land Steward Program provides regular communications and a website to help landowners and professionals stay current on educational

opportunities and assistance programs. These communications are an important way to stay informed of recovery assistance that may be available after a hurricane or other disaster. See <https://programs.ifas.ufl.edu/florida-land-steward/> to connect with this program and network.

## Be Ready to Apply for U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Recovery Assistance

Within weeks of a major storm or other disaster, recovery assistance for agricultural producers and landowners will likely be authorized. The USDA Farm Service Agency administers several disaster recovery programs aimed at providing financial assistance to farmers and landowners in order for them to clean up debris, replant crops and trees, replace damaged equipment and infrastructure, and implement other recovery activities.

**This part is important.** If you have not worked with USDA before, you will need to make an appointment with the Farm Service Agency at your local USDA Service Center to complete some forms and ensure your eligibility when assistance programs become available. **Get this step done well in advance of hurricane season.** For more information about getting started with USDA see <https://www.farmers.gov/working-with-us>.

When you complete the eligibility process you can consider enrolling in assistance programs through USDA Natural

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Resources Conservation Service, <https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/site/fl/home/> (e.g., Environmental Quality Incentives Program [EQIP]), and/or Farm Service Agency, <https://www.fsa.usda.gov/state-offices/Florida/index> (e.g., Conservation Reserve Program [CRP]) to help you reach your land management goals. Having your land or farm enrolled in such a program will help you get connected to recovery assistance programs if/when they are available after a natural disaster.

## Work with a Professional Forester and Get a Forest Inventory

Consulting foresters provide technical assistance in all phases of forest management for a fee. Their services include management plan preparation, forest inventory, timber sales, thinning, tree planting, herbicide and fertilizer application, prescribed burning, and more. The expertise, guidance, and connections of a forester can be invaluable in the recovery process after the storm. An inventory completed within the last 5 years will provide an estimate of the number and types of trees, their size, and an estimate of the value of the standing timber. This information may be important documentation if financial assistance is available after a hurricane or other natural disaster. Note that the casualty loss deduction for tax purposes is limited to the lesser of the basis (basically, the amount invested in the stand) or the fair market value (Wang 2018). To learn more about timber inventory review this document:

*Timber Inventory: A Primer for Landowners* <https://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/publication/fr426>

For tips on selecting a consulting forester, see <https://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/publication/fr125>

## Review Your Road Network with a Forester and Road Construction Contractor

Intense rainfall and flooding during storms can wash out poorly constructed roads and blow out culverts. Florida Forest Service foresters are available at no cost to review your roads, stream crosses, and fire plow lines before a storm hits to ensure soil and water protection and compliance with Florida's Silviculture Best Management Practices (BMPs). For more information on forestry BMPs, see <https://www.fdacs.gov/Forest-Wildfire/Silviculture-Best-Management-Practices>.

Also consider surveying your roadside and right-of-way for hazard trees or those likely to fall across your roads. Ensuring you have access to all parts of your property will increase the likelihood that salvage operations can take place on your property after a storm. While canopy-covered roads can be aesthetically pleasing, consider “daylighting” your roadbeds to help them dry quickly after heavy rain. Daylighting refers to removing some trees along the sides of roads to allow more sunlight to dry the roadbed.

## Become Familiar with the Local Timber Industry

After a storm that causes widespread damage in an area, everyone is trying to line up salvage crews. It is during these times of crisis that personal relationships will help get your calls answered and logging crews deployed quickly. The Florida Forestry Association provides opportunities to meet consultants, loggers, contractors, agency representatives, and others involved in the timber industry in Florida. See <https://www.flforestry.org> to learn more and get involved.

## Connect with Other Landowners

Knowing your fellow landowners and neighbors is always helpful, but in the event of a disaster being connected can really help. It is easier to get salvage done on smaller properties or those with less timber if there are groups of landowners near each other to attract timber buyers. Having a network can also help with other management activities after the salvage harvest has been completed. Consider joining a landowner cooperative or a local Rotary club, or just get to know people who live around your property.

## Pre-Storm Preparation Tips

**Shut down thinning operations that are underway, or scheduled to begin, when a hurricane is projected to make landfall in your area**—Thinning operations that open the stand structure can leave the stand more vulnerable to windthrow and damage if the trees have not had time to respond to the new open conditions.

**Do some pruning**—Prune trees regularly, especially those over structures and fences, to reduce broken or dead limbs that could cause damage.

**Fill the tanks**—Top off tanks and containers containing drinking water, gas, diesel, propane, chain saw fuel, and other materials to ensure availability during post-storm recovery.

**Keep culverts and ditches clean**—Open drainages ensure excess storm water doesn't back up and cause flooding.

**Check emergency equipment**—Make sure that all emergency equipment, including generators, chain saws, air compressors, and other tools, is on hand and in good working condition.

**Check communications equipment**—Have cell phone chargers in all vehicles and charged backup cell phone batteries. If you have them, ensure that hand-held radios are charged and in good working order.

**Secure hazardous materials**—Ensure that hazardous materials are stored safely and shut down gasoline pumps before the storm.

**Lock your gates**—Keeping your gates locked will prevent unauthorized individuals from damaging wet roads and reduce liability.

**Take photos**—Take photos of your stands and/or fields before the storm so you can have a record of the condition of these areas before damage occurs. This could help with records needed for insurance claims and/or government assistance programs.

**Time for harvest?**—If in line with your management plan and objectives, consider selling your mature timber stands in a lump sum sale (vs. pay as cut) before hurricane season to capture the full market value of the products you have. A salvage sale of a storm-damaged stand will only yield 10% to 15% of the normal market value. See “Steps to Marketing Timber,” <https://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/publication/fr130>, for important considerations for selling your timber. Whether you are working with a consultant to market your timber or doing it yourself, we recommend doing business with qualified, trained loggers that are certified in the Master Logger Program. The Florida Forestry Association provides an online tool to help you find a certified Master Logger in your county at <https://www.flforestry.org/programs/master-logger/>.

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