Urban Forest Strike Team Deploys to Jacksonville State University

By Will Liner, AFC Urban and Community Forestry Partnership Coordinator

On the evening of March 19, 2018, a devastating EF-3 tornado ripped through Jacksonville with winds up to 150 miles per hour. Thankfully, there were no fatalities, but the storm left behind a path of destruction up to 2,000 yards wide. Caught in the center of the tornado's track was Jacksonville State University (JSU). Several university buildings were severely damaged, lamp posts were snapped or bent, the softball field lights and outfield fence were torn apart, and many windows were broken across campus. Tragically, among the wreckage were hundreds of bent, broken, and toppled trees that were a signature of JSU's beautiful campus.

Only two days after the tornado, the Alabama Emergency Management Agency (AEMA) recognized the need for the Urban Forest Strike Team (UFST) and submitted a request through their web-based resource ordering system, WebEOC. After the Alabama Forestry Commission's (AFC) Urban and Community Forestry group traveled to Jacksonville and conducted an initial reconnaissance, it was determined that out-of-state UFST help would be beneficial and that the Jacksonville State University campus would be the area of focus for the team. David Thompson, the Director of Physical Plant at Jacksonville State University, worked with AFC Urban Forestry Coordinator Dale Dickens to organize the necessary logistics.

The Urban Forest Strike Team is a group of International Society of Arboriculture (ISA) Certified Arborists highly trained to provide disaster planning, tree risk assessment, and Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) public assistance information to communities following natural disasters, including tornados. The need for this type of service was first recognized in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina when multiple communities on the gulf coast severely underestimated the cost of tree and debris removal. During Hurricane Katrina recovery, it was also recognized that many of the seemingly healthy trees left behind by contractors had critical structural damage and represented a hazard to the public, while many of the trees marked for removal could be saved by proper tree care practices. These observations ultimately led to the creation of the Urban Forest Strike Team in 2007, with support from the Southern Group of State Foresters and the USDA Forest Service. Since then, the program has grown to cover most of the eastern United States, and has responded to disasters including ice storms, floods, tornados, and hurricanes.

The UFST has three primary functions that are of value to a community following a disaster event:

1. To locate, mark, and document storm-damaged trees that are a threat to property and people,
2. Identify trees affected by the disaster, but that can be saved by proper tree care. This is an important step to speeding the recovery of a community's tree canopy.
3. To provide quick and accurate debris estimation for FEMA reporting and community planning.

These three functions save the community money, protect citizens from hazardous trees, and help the community start to rebuild the destroyed tree canopy. Trees are a defining characteristic of our communities and their presence is interwoven into our sense of place. For JSU the magnolias by the President's house or the stately loblolly pines within Trustees Circle served this purpose. For many of us, it may be a hickory at the house where you grew up, an oak tree with a rope swing, or a distinctive pine you used as a landmark.

After a disaster event, many of these mature trees are damaged or completely destroyed. In fact, while working at JSU a state trooper stopped one of our crews to talk about how different campus looked without the large trees and asked how long it

would take to regrow the lost mature trees. Unfortunately, it takes many years for trees to grow to that size, which is why it is so important to protect and save them following a disaster when possible. However, storm-damaged trees can be extremely hazardous and should be evaluated by an ISA Certified Arborist to make sure they are safe to leave.

The UFST deployment officially began on March 26, and crews started collecting data on the 27, a mere eight days after the tornado struck campus. This was the first time an Urban Forest Strike Team had been deployed in Alabama, and the first time in the history of the UFST program that a multi-state team began work within eight days of a disaster.

The team deployed in Jacksonville was led by UFST Team Leader Will Liner of the Alabama Forestry Commission and was comprised of five additional arborists: Dale Dickens, AFC; Joe Burgess and Seth Hawkins, Georgia Forestry Commission; as well as Todd Matthews and Tympel Harrison, Mississippi Forestry Commission. Abi Dhakal of the AFC was another vital member of the team, providing the crews with technical support for their data collectors and setting up the requisite mapping software. Dudley Hartel, the Science Delivery and Technology Coordinator for Urban Forestry in the USDA Forest Service Southern Region (Region 8), was also an invaluable resource as he helped Dale Dickens, Will Liner, and Abi Dhakal properly organize and set up the deployment.

Over the course of two days, the team collected data on 432 trees spread across campus and marked them for removal with orange paint, or for pruning with white paint. Data was only collected for publicly-owned trees with storm damage, so the team actually surveyed more trees than the 432 that appear on the map. For each tree assessed, the university was provided GPS coordinates, tree species, diameter of the tree, the damaged part of the tree, action (remove or prune) recommended by the crew, and what action (if any) FEMA will reimburse if a federal emergency declaration is made. At the time of deployment, no federal emergency declaration had been made, but AEMA officials, campus officials, and municipal officials were collecting information to make this determination.

Natural disasters can occur at any time and the Alabama Forestry Commission stands ready to assist the citizens of Alabama whenever and wherever these disasters strike. The Urban Forest Strike Team is one of many ways the AFC assists communities impacted by natural disasters. Chainsaw crews, wildland firefighters, and aerial photography are other ways the agency can assist communities in need. Municipal officials are encouraged to submit requests to the Alabama Emergency Management Agency when disasters impact the trees in their communities. They can also contact either Dale Dickens, Urban Forestry Coordinator at (334) 240-9360 or Will Liner, Urban and Community Forestry Partnership Coordinator at (334) 240-9306.