

# **EXTERNAL EVENTS**

**The  
WILDCARD  
of  
EMERGENCY  
MANAGEMENT**



**Telling 3 Million People Where  
to Go – Hurricane Rita  
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Tuesday, May 2, 2006**

# Katrina sets the Stage

- Three weeks earlier Katrina hits Gulf Coast of Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama
- Loss of life is staggering especially in New Orleans and the nation is horrified
- Houston opens it's arms to evacuees



# Impact of Katrina on Rita

- Huge Impact on Public Behavior
- No one wanted to be “that guy rescued from the roof”
- No Texas elected official wanted to leave citizens in peril
- The “Katrina Effect” is born



# And then came Rita

- Sept. 19, TS Rita enters the Gulf Mexico and is expected to be a threat to the Texas coast
- Preparation begins to move Texans to higher ground
- Sept. 20 Rita is a Cat 2 Hurricane
- Voluntary evacuation begins at 6:00 PM



# Hurricane Rita

- Sept. 21 – Cat 5 storm with peak wind gusts of 235 MPH
- “Rita is the strongest storm that I’ve ever been in” Lt. Col. Warren Madden – the Weather Channel
- Systematic mandatory evacuation begins at 6:00 PM with coastal residents first



# Hurricane Rita

- 1<sup>st</sup> time Mayor and County Judges had the authority to call for a mandatory evacuation
- “Katrina Effect” and the local media hype associated with the call for mandatory evacuations validates the public’s anxious feelings
- Category 5 – Larger and stronger than Katrina
- All makes for the Perfect Storm

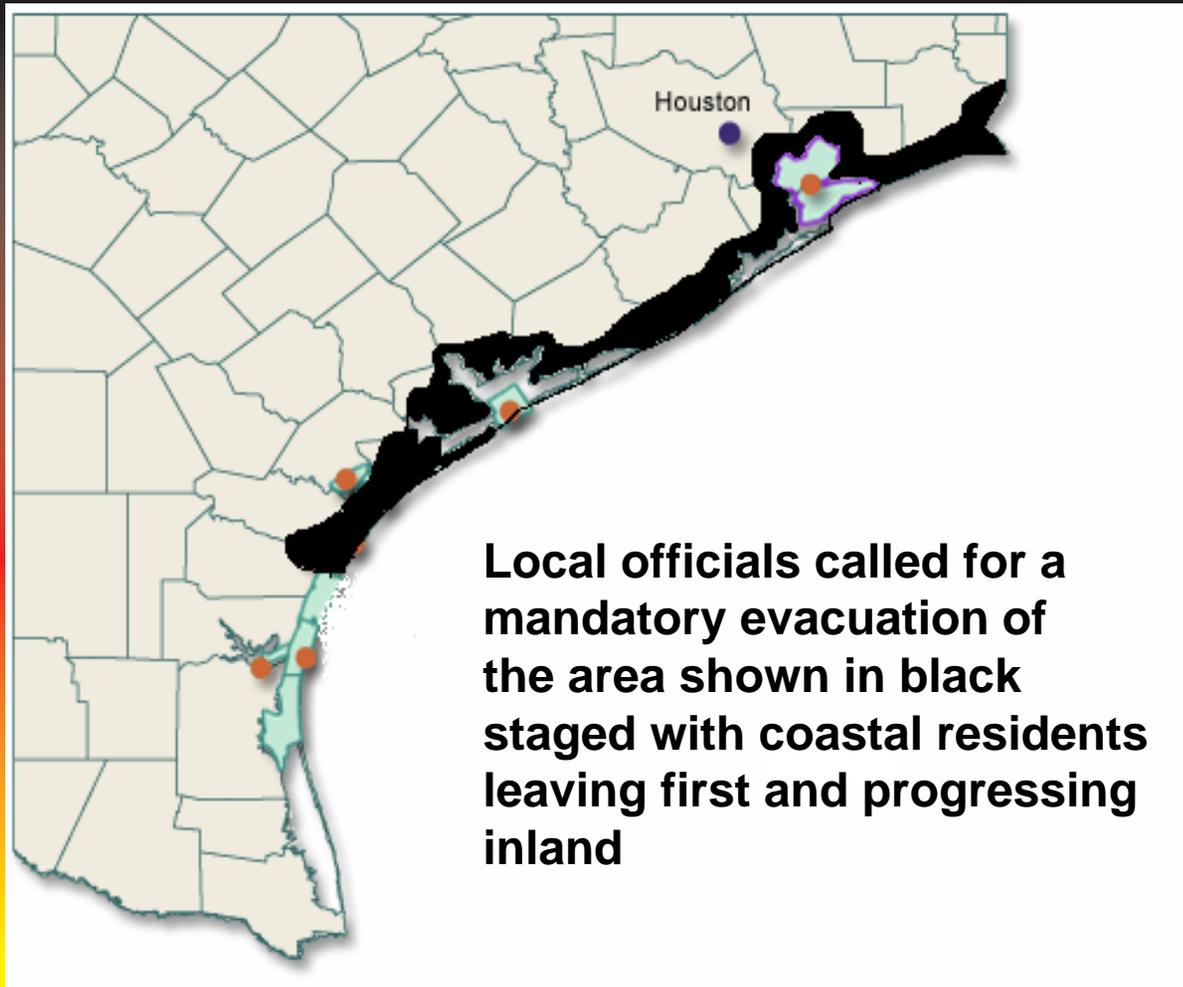


# Hurricane Rita

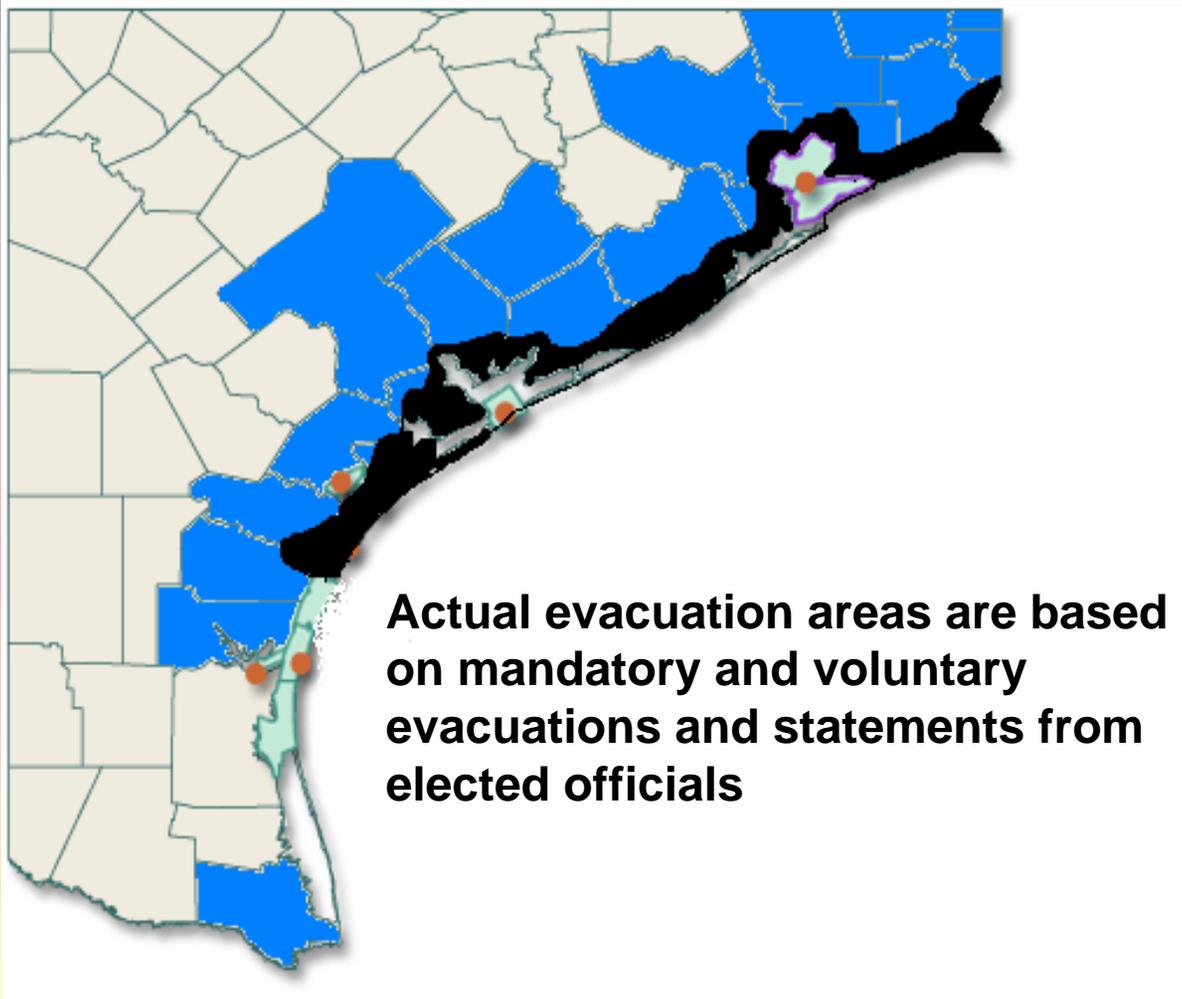
- Sept. 22 – **The Day from Hell**
- What happened to the systematic evacuation of the Gulf coast counties and low lying areas inland?



# Area of Mandatory Evacuation



# Area that actually evacuated



# Influence of a Category 5 Hurricane

- **EXPECTED**
  - 445,000 vehicles
  - 1.2 million evacuees
  
- **ACTUAL**
  - 1.7 million vehicles
  - 2.8 million evacuees



The result.



# Communications Issues

- Elected officials with the power to call for a mandatory evacuation
- No clear consistent message
- Lacking public education on the process of an evacuation



# Communications Issues

- Media demand for information
  - National coverage
    - Handled with regularly scheduled news conferences out of Houston TranStar
  - Local media
    - Covered news conferences but we supplemented with phone interviews by HQ PIO
  - Multiple levels of government and varying agencies responding to inquiries

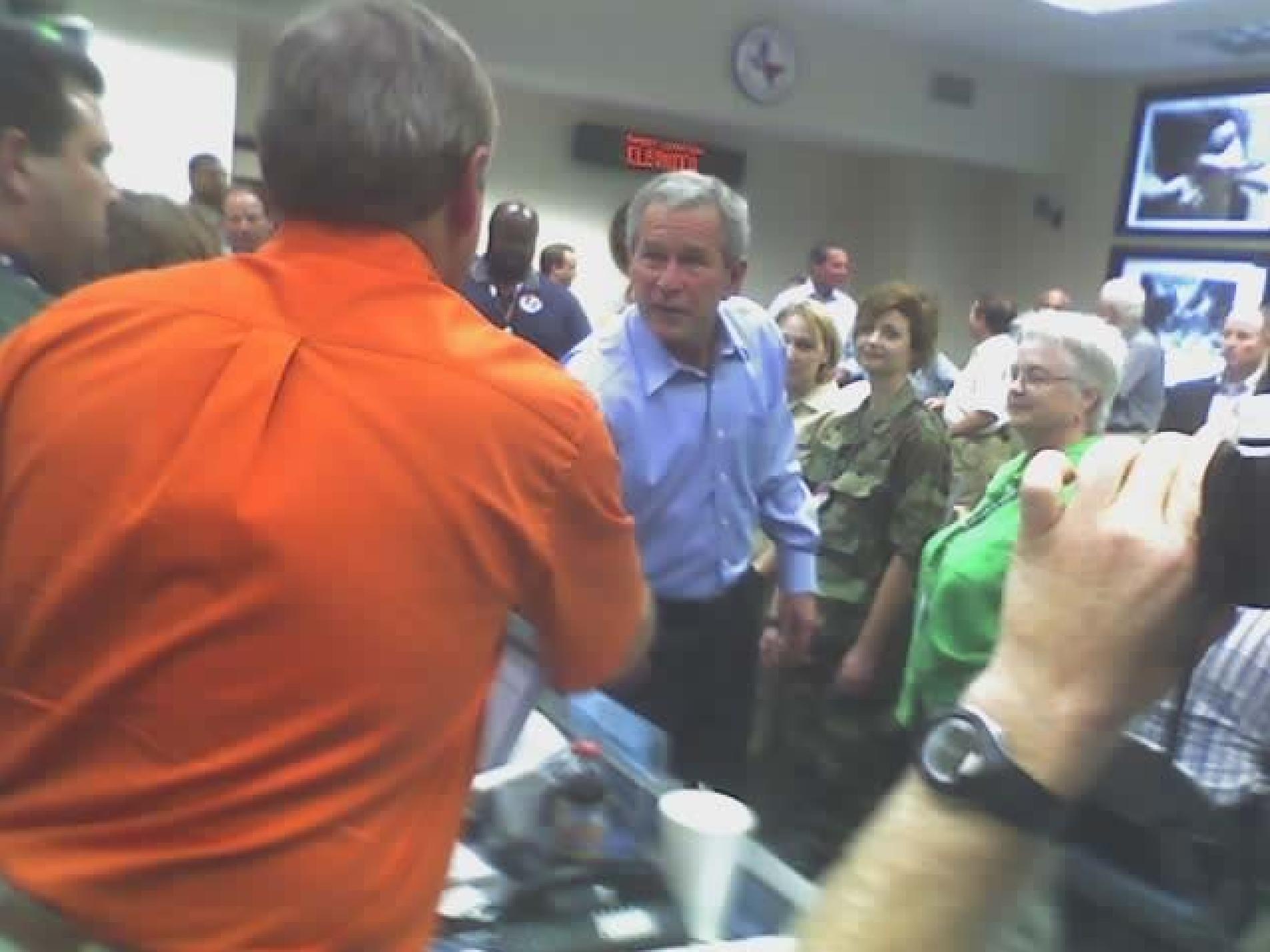


# Communications Issues

- Public demand for information
  - Phone
    - 2-person office in Houston
    - 12 travel centers assisting by HCR
  - Web
    - Hundreds of email each hour
    - Houston TranStar real-time travel map
  - Wireless
    - Cell phones and BlackBerry
  - Make it personal
    - Verify what they heard in the media







# Post Rita Evaluation

- Governor's Task Force
- Local Houston and Harris County Review
- TxDOT Review Team
  - Get people to safety
  - Help in the cleanup and recovery
  - Get people home safely



# Public Information Initiatives

- Supplement the DEM public information campaign with a separate campaign for transportation-related messages
  - Evacuation Routes
  - Fuel availability
  - Publicize TxDOT 800-number



# Information Lessons

- Internally decide on the technology to be used to communicate
- Expand the list of those in the “Loop”
- Keep the media reporting on those things that are under your realm of authority



# Information Lessons

- Quickly correct bad information
  - Internal
  - External
- Adjust the public's expectations with respect to fuel availability and contra-flow
- Technology is a blessing and a curse
  - The phone calls and email never stop
  - You can work from almost anywhere

