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Mason-Dixon Poll Reveals Residents of Coastal States Grossly Unprepared for 2009 Hurricane Season

-- After an active 2008 hurricane season, residents from Texas to Maine have taken no steps to prepare for major storms--

MIAMI—Even after feeling the threat of five major hurricanes, all category 3 or stronger, during the 2008 hurricane season, many Americans in the Gulf and Atlantic coastal states have made no preparations for the impending “mean season,” according to a new Mason-Dixon poll released today.

The poll shows most residents in coastal states still do not feel vulnerable to the catastrophic destruction and deadly force that can be brought on by a storm and most have not adequately prepared for coming storms. More than half of those polled reported that they would not leave home if a major storm was approaching or would only evacuate if ordered by local officials.

“It is crucial that residents of coastal states be aware that they must prepare in advance,” said Florida Lieutenant Governor Jeff Kottkamp. “Waiting until 24 hours before the storm hits is simply not enough time and puts residents at great risk.”

The Mason-Dixon poll was conducted as part of the **2009 National Hurricane Survival Initiative**, which was launched today at a news conference at the International Hurricane Research Center in Miami at Florida International University. The initiative, which focuses on hurricane-vulnerable states, aims to educate residents on hurricane preparedness and how to stay safe from the risks they face.

“As the 2009 hurricane season approaches, many residents still believe it won’t happen to them,” said Dr. Jack Beven, senior hurricane forecaster at the National Hurricane Center. “Unfortunately, these devastating storms could happen to anyone and the only way to keep yourself and your family safe is to be prepared.”

Emergency management officials found these poll results to be the most alarming:

- 83% said they have not taken any steps in the past year to make their homes stronger, even after last year's active season.
- 66% have no hurricane survival kit.
- 62% don't feel vulnerable to a hurricane or related tornado or flooding.
- 55% do not have a family disaster plan.

The National Hurricane Survival Initiative uses the poll as one of the leading elements in a public education and safety outreach campaign, developed through a partnership among **the National Hurricane Center**, the **National Emergency Management Association**, **The Salvation Army** and the **International Hurricane Research Center at Florida International University**. Corporate partners include **Travelers** and **Plylox**. The project is produced by **Ron Sachs Communications** in cooperation with **CoreMessage**.

Other elements of the initiative include an informative and interactive Web site, www.HurricaneSafety.org and a 30-minute television program, **"Get Ready, America!"** The television program will be broadcast throughout hurricane season on more than 55 television network-affiliate stations, with secondary broadcasts on cable and government access channels from Texas to Maine. Residents are encouraged to visit www.HurricaneSafety.org for a list of broadcast partners or to check their local listings for air dates and times.

The National Oceanic & Atmospheric Association (NOAA) predicts the 2009 hurricane season will be near normal this year with a 70 percent chance of having nine to 14 named storms, of which four to seven could become hurricanes, including one to three major hurricanes, category 3, 4 or 5.

"Technology advances have significantly improved the way we measure and track storms; therefore, residents have far more warning about impending storm dangers," said Patrick Irons, director for business development of the International Hurricane Research Center. "These warnings are being underutilized by many coastal residents."

INSURANCE CONCERNS

"Insurance may not seem like a priority in the face of a deadly storm, but the aftermath of hurricanes can be almost as disastrous as the storms themselves," said Ray Stone, vice president of Catastrophe Operations at Travelers. "Homes are destroyed, property is gone. Don't wait until after a storm to review your coverage."

The poll revealed several concerns about the adequacy of homeowners' insurance coverage:

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- 49% are not sure if their homeowner's insurance requires repairs to be made to prevent further damage before they are compensated for their losses.
- 48% do not have a homeowner's insurance policy that covers damage caused by a flood and another 15% were not sure if their policy covered flood damage.
- 22% said they were not sure or not at all confident that they had the right type and amount of insurance coverage to rebuild their home as it currently stands. Experts

- say these findings mean there is a significant risk that many residents would not have sufficient coverage to rebuild if they suffered a catastrophic loss.
- 21% did not know their policy number or how to reach their agent or carrier.

“It is unfortunate that one out of five people don’t know their policy number and have no idea how to reach their agent or carrier,” said Stone. “In the frantic aftermath of a catastrophic storm, homeowners need to have as much information as possible to be able to recover and repair their belongings quickly.”

KNOWLEDGE GAPS

The survey revealed residents of hurricane-vulnerable states still have significant gaps in their knowledge of hurricanes and storm preparedness, including:

- 97% didn’t know that garage doors are the structural component most likely to fail during a hurricane. Property owners can easily strengthen garage doors at low cost with a reinforcement kit.
- 70% didn’t know that storm surge represents the greatest potential for a large loss of life from a hurricane, yet storm surge can account for deaths as far inland as 20 miles.
- 56% didn’t know that the most interior room of the house is the safest place to ride out a hurricane. Half of the respondents believe the basement is the safest place to ride out a hurricane. In fact, the basement poses a serious risk of drowning in the event of storm surge or flooding.
- 56% of residents believe candles or kerosene lamps are suggested items for their survival kits. Emergency experts actually warn that these items can pose a serious fire hazard.
- 51% still believe masking tape would keep windows from shattering. In reality, masking tape provides no protective value at all.

“There is a preventable level of damage and injury if people take smart precautionary steps,” said Rob Fee, president of Plylox. “In order to prevent window shatter and increase the likelihood that your property will survive, it is essential to board up your windows, reinforce the garage door and move outdoor furniture inside.”

INSUFFICIENT PREPARATION

While most residents have sufficient warning time before a storm hits, many do not prepare their homes or wait too long to make last-minute preparations to their structures. Emergency officials recommend taking steps to strengthen your home or business as far in advance of storm season as possible, yet poll results found that:

- 31% said they would not make any special preparations to their home.
- 24% said they would not begin to prepare their home until a hurricane warning was issued, which means a hurricane is expected to hit within 24 hours. In fact, residents should have boarded their windows, reinforced garage doors, and made sure their yards are clear of debris long before this point.

“While relief organizations take all the steps necessary to provide hurricane assistance and relief to thousands of residents, their efforts are often limited to the most dire circumstances first,” said Sharon Polarek, national liaison for disaster services for The Salvation Army. “Residents must prepare themselves with at least three days worth of food, water and medicine in case emergency assistance is delayed.”

The survey also found many residents will not take the proper safety precautions:

- One in four would evacuate as far as possible, trying to outrun the path of the storm. Instead, emergency officials say residents should only go as far as necessary to get to a secure structure outside the evacuation zone.
- 11% say they are responsible for an elderly or disabled relative who lives in a hurricane-vulnerable area, yet more than one-third of them say they have no plan for that person in the event of a hurricane.

While poll findings revealed that two out of three residents lack a survival kit, most respondents possess many of the elements in a kit, including flashlight, batteries, first aid kit, radio and other items.

PRE- AND POST-EVACUATION RISKS

Evacuation is a crucial part of safety during a major storm. Poll results found that:

- 86% percent of pet owners said they would take their pets with them and look for a place that will accept them. Few shelters and lodging establishments accept pets. That is why it is vital evacuees have a sound plan before they leave.
- 54% would not leave if a major storm approached their area or they would wait for local officials to order then to evacuate.
- 30% said they would return as soon as the storm passed. However, more deaths typically occur after a hurricane due to downed power lines, unstable trees and flooding.
- 17% would leave only 12-24 hours before the landfall of a major storm, increasing the chances of evacuation gridlock and the likelihood of evacuees riding out a storm in one of the most vulnerable location -- on the road.

“Every year, hurricane season poses a significant threat to lives and property – but there are many steps families can take to protect themselves now,” said Ron Sachs, executive producer of the **National Hurricane Survival Initiative**. “We keep providing public education about these steps – but Americans need to step up and take responsibility for doing their part.”

The survey was conducted by Mason-Dixon Polling & Research of 1,100 adults in Atlantic and Gulf Coast states between May 6 and May 11, 2009. The margin for error is plus or minus three percent. For the full poll results and more information about the 2009 **National Hurricane Survival Initiative**, visit www.HurricaneSafety.org.

For any questions regarding poll methodology, please contact Brad Coker of Mason-Dixon Polling & Research at 904-261-2444 or bcoker@mason-dixon.com.