

Getting back to business after storms key

By DAVID ROYSE
 Associated Press

TALLAHASSEE — It's a couple of days after a hurricane and most of the danger has passed. Now the fight is against discomfort and misery.

There's no electricity yet, which means no hot meals, no gasoline, no cash from the ATM. And it's a day without air conditioning in the stifling Florida summer. Cell phone batteries are dying — and it's hard to get a signal anyway.

One thing fixes most of the misery: electricity. Even if your house doesn't have power, it helps when there's electricity somewhere — maybe a nearby restaurant, or a store with cold bottled water, maybe even a bar with cold beer.

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"You might not have your air, but you can go out and drive somewhere and get something to eat with the kids because they're going nuts," said Richard Walker, a West Palm Beach businessman who has been thinking a lot in the last couple of years about the power outages caused by hurricanes. "People have got to get food and people have got to get fuel."

After seeing the inconvenience faced by his community after two years of hurricanes, Walker started Power To Go, a company that provides mobile generators for businesses, primarily restaurants and gas stations.

"In 2004, we sold over 460 generators," Walker said. "In 2005, we sold over a thousand." This year he'll exceed that by the middle of hurricane season.

Hurricanes can wreak havoc

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on Florida's electric system. While many new power lines are underground, older ones are still strung above ground and falling trees can bring them down. For example, Hurricane Wilma last October knocked out electricity to more than 6 million people across South Florida. Many were without power for more than two weeks.



The power companies say they're better prepared than ever to deal with hurricanes and moving to make their infrastructure more sturdy, hoping to do their part to get things back on after a storm.

But many businesses won't be waiting for the utilities. Stung by being without power for more than two weeks after last year's Hurricane Wilma, many are going to businesses like Walker's to make sure they can get back up and running quickly.

Some say they don't want to lose loyal customers. And like many people after a disaster, they feel a certain kinship with their community — they want to be able to help.

"I've been in business for a long time in South Florida," said Max Alvarez of Miami, who owns about 50 gas stations around the region — and who has for years made sure he's had enough generators to get them all running as soon as he can get gasoline after a hurricane.

The quicker he can start selling the gas, the better for everyone, Alvarez said, noting that he tries

to make sure he can open so he can provide fuel for power company trucks, police cars and ambulances.

But business owners also admit it's in their economic best interest as well. If they can't open, they can't make money.

"If I'm in the business to generate a profit, and if I determine that having a generator is going to help do that, of course I'm going to go buy a generator," Alvarez said.

A new state law will eventually require owners with multiple gas stations like Alvarez to have mobile generators. But like Alvarez, many gas station owners already have moved to get hold of generators.

Jim Smith, president of Florida Petroleum Marketers and Convenience Store Association, which represents mostly small gas stations, said his membership — about 60 percent of those in Florida — is now about 20 percent generator capable, meaning they could easily switch to generator power. Many of those actually have contracts for

generators, he said.

"A majority of those generators are going to be portable," Smith said, meaning they can be moved to stations that have been hit, rather than being stuck at a station that may not need it.

That doesn't take into account the major oil company-owned stations, most of which have access to generators now.

And generator power is becoming the norm at big retailers that have the items people need after a storm.

Publix, for example, has a goal of having generators at about 400 of its stores this year.

Home Depot — where people may go for repair supplies as soon as the winds die down — has long had generators in all its Florida stores, said company vice president Bob Puzon.

"As long as we have 10 associates in the store we can open immediately," Puzon said.

Smith cautioned that just because businesses like gas stations have power doesn't mean hurricanes will no longer be a problem. Hurricanes, can wipe out days of fuel delivery, meaning some stations won't have gas to pump.

It can be the same for restaurants, which may not be able to get food deliveries.

"We can't lull the citizens of the state into a false sense of security that everything's going to be normal, it's not," Smith said.