



Home-goods retailers gear up for hurricane season

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618 words

2 June 2006

12:38

[Reuters News](#)

English

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ATLANTA, June 2 (Reuters) - Home Depot Inc. and other supply companies are knee-deep in preparations for the Atlantic hurricane season even as a new survey indicates many residents in the U.S. Gulf and southern states are ill-equipped to cope with a flood or other natural disaster.

A telephone survey of 1,269 people, commissioned by Home Depot and conducted by Harris Interactive, found that just 18 percent of residents felt their family was "very prepared" for an event such as a hurricane or flood, with 19 percent saying they are "not at all prepared."

The poll of adults living in 18 states and the District of Columbia also found that nearly half, or 47 percent, have no evacuation plans for a natural disaster, while only four out of 10 residents have a disaster supplies kit.

"We've tried to focus customers on preparing for the storms," said Paul Raines, president of Home Depot's Southern division, which includes about 700 stores in 15 states.

"We're facing a tougher hurricane environment," Raines added. "There are more people living on the coast."

After Hurricanes Katrina and Rita devastated the U.S. Gulf region last year, Home Depot has worked feverishly to get its own house in order to be able to serve customers during the 2006 season, which officially began this week.

Two stores in the New Orleans area had to be gutted and rebuilt, while others have been upgraded with heavy-duty generators, heating and cooling equipment and computer systems. The 2005 hurricanes affected close to 80 Home Depot stores, some of which had significant damage.

PLAN, PLAN, PLAN

At Home Depot, hurricane planning includes studying past storm sales data to determine needed products, locating facilities that can be set up to handle logistics once a storm hits, and determining how many outside staffers will be shipped in to relieve store workers in hurricane-hit areas.

The retailer has also begun offering in-store clinics on various hurricane preparation topics, such as how to protect property from high winds.

"We attack hurricanes with a lot of passion," Raines said. "Unlike most retailers, consumers expect us to be there and to have solutions to their needs in terms of their homes."

Once a storm develops, the retailer activates a "war room" on one floor of its Atlanta headquarters, staffing it round-the-clock with weather trackers, communications and government affairs workers.

At rival Lowe's Cos. , similar activities take place at its emergency command center in Mooresville, North Carolina, to keep distribution centers stocked with hurricane supplies once a storm hits.

"The pressure these events put on our supply chain is something you can't plan," said Home Depot's Raines. "It's a rapid reaction to move thousands of containers of merchandise into an area through bad roads and bridges that have been knocked out."

Hurricanes tend to spur a run on emergency supplies such as plywood, flashlights and generators, but in the wake of last year's massive flooding that damaged the interior of houses, other products such as drywall, appliances and flooring have become a big focus, Raines said.

Generator makers, in particular, have increased production, but product shortages are still expected this season.

"The manufacturers are having a very hard time keeping up with demand," said Rusty **Walker**, vice president of sales at **Power To Go**, a West Palm Beach, Florida, maker of towable generators for homes and commercial buildings.

"As soon as there's a storm, whatever inventories are out there will be depleted," **Walker** said.