

Show-Me Sunshine

Missouri work crews help Florida recover from hurricane

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Public and private workers have returned to Missouri after Hurricane Irma recovery efforts in Florida and Georgia — what the Missouri Department of Transportation has called its largest ever deployment to help another state.

Fifty-eight MoDOT employees, 18 Missouri Department of Natural Resources' State Parks employees, and 133 linemen from 22 systems organized by the Association of Missouri Electric Cooperatives traveled south to help their professional companions with the Florida Department of Transportation; Florida State Parks; SECO Energy in Sumterville, Florida; and Flint Energies based in Reynolds, Georgia.

The storm's weakening after making landfall on the island of Cuba and a later-than-predicted northward turn spared Florida from some of the destruction originally feared from Irma when it was a Category 5 hurricane streaming across the Caribbean.

However, the powerful storm still made

landfall in the Florida Keys as a Category 4 hurricane and unleashed destructive winds across the mainland of Florida's peninsula, along with storm surge along the coasts and heavy rain.

According to a news release from the Association of Missouri Electric Cooperatives, more than half of SECO Energy's 200,000 customers in Florida were without power at one point. The outages in the state's center began the evening of Sept. 10 as Irma's tropical storm-force bands entered the area.

Restoration began at noon Sept. 11 once the storm had passed and winds subsided.

Central Electric Power Cooperative of Jefferson City was one of the co-ops to send crews south upon AMEC's request. Central Electric's Director of Administrative Services Mark Newbold and Director of Operations Adam Weber said four men volunteered to help: Troy Eichelberger, 43, leadman electrician mechanic, of St. Martins; and three journeyman electrician mechanics — Ryan Verslues, 42, of Jefferson City; Ryan Hagner, 41, of Wardsville; and Nick Neuner, 29, of Linn.

Weber said the crew left Sept. 12 and returned Tuesday. They spent much of their time in Ocala, Florida, and did something Weber said they hadn't done before — haul fuel to support other crews working to repair the system.

He said the crew took south about 4,500 gallons of diesel and 1,400 gallons of gasoline. "They used pretty well all of the diesel," and maybe about 400 gallons of gasoline, he said.

Their co-op's tanker truck normally is used to haul oil for transformer, substation and breaker maintenance, he said, but fuel became a critical need to support recovery operations in Florida.

"Where there isn't electricity in the area, it's pretty hard to come by fuel," he said — a vicious cycle of gas stations not having power to pump fuel, but "now there's all these

trucks coming in that need fuel to keep working” to repair the electrical grid: bucket trucks, digger derricks and trucks hauling materials.

“Everybody was very thankful down there,” Hagner said of the crews whose trucks they refueled — too many to keep a mental tally, though he added they logged at least 80-150 trucks a day for the 16-19 hours they worked every day. The night before they got there, he said, the line for trucks to refuel just to work the next day had been an hour and a half long, and they helped shorten that wait.

“This is the very first time I’ve done anything like that,” he said. A father of three little boys, his wife approved of him going. “I knew other people had more needs for us to help than what we needed back here,” he said.

He said he would do something like it again if asked; the only reason they came home when they did was they were sent back to prepare for Hurricane Maria, were it to have made landfall in Florida.

Co-Mo Electric Cooperative of Tipton also sent a crew to help Florida after Irma.

Local MoDOT employees deployed to Florida include Scott Campbell, safety officer, based in Jefferson City; James Duncan, senior equipment technician, floater based in Jefferson City; Bob Lansford, senior maintenance worker, Fulton; Parker Lawrence, intermediate maintenance worker, Jefferson City; and Kerry Nilges, maintenance crew leader, Linn.

According to MoDOT Communications Manager Sally Oxenhandler, workers also took two John Deere front loaders, several trucks and trailers, and a 1-ton mechanics truck.

Oxenhandler said the MoDOT crews left Sept. 12 and returned Thursday. They primarily worked to cut fallen trees and clear roads of debris, especially on a stretch from downtown Miami through Coral Gables to Homestead, she said.

The Florida Department of Transportation requested assistance from any available state Sept. 9, before Irma made landfall, according to an earlier MoDOT news release.

Missouri was one of three states to send staff — the others being Delaware and Maryland.

Oxenhandler said a small crew of technicians deployed to Florida to help with traffic signal repairs after another hurricane in 2005, but the post-Irma efforts were the largest inter-state assistance deployment to date.

The crew of Missouri State Parks employees represented 11 state parks and left for Florida on Sept. 11, Division Information Officer Brian Quinn reported.

Before returning Tuesday, the crew worked to clear fallen trees and other debris from Dade Historic Battlefield State Park between Tampa and Orlando and Anastasia State Recreation Area near St. Augustine.

The crew worked 12-hour days, using equipment like front loaders, trucks, bobcats, chainsaws and a bucket truck they brought with them. Two Missouri State Park rangers provided security.

Quinn also reported that at one point, 168 of Florida’s 174 state parks were closed due to storm damage.