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Storm Forecasting Gets Offshore Boost

BUOYS, TIDE GAUGES MAY HELP SAVE LIVES

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Media General News Service

A couple of additions to the west Pasco coastline are bound to help this hurricane season. They may even save lives.

A tide gauge placed on the coast at Brasher Park in Port Richey two months ago and one being placed at Aripeka will give forecasters more information on tide changes.

Add in a new weather buoy placed 28 miles off the Hudson coast, and the result is that west Pasco now is included in an extensive early warning system started in 1997.

"A tropical storm coming up the coast can build quite a storm surge," explained Cliff Merz, director of the Coastal Ocean Monitoring and Prediction System. COMPS is a program of the University of South Florida College of Marine Science in St. Petersburg.

COMPS digests a huge amount of information on changing weather conditions.

"Being able to record data out in the Gulf is being able to prepare for it onshore," Merz said. "We want to get as much

advance warning as possible."

COMPS started as three offshore weather buoys and six coastal stations from Shell Point south to Florida Bay and the Everglades, Merz said. At the time, USF researchers were hoping to help with storm-surge predictions and forecasting.

Through the combined efforts of city and county governments, offices of emergency management and the National Weather Service office in Ruskin, Merz said COMPS has grown. Homosassa Springs and Tarpon Springs each got shoreline gauges that way. Now, west Pasco is participating.

Pasco County Emergency Management Director Michele Baker and Merz received a grant from the Emergency Management Trust Fund last year. The grant paid for the buoy, which cost about \$200,000, Baker said, and the Aripeka tide gauge.

The Brasher Park gauge, along the southwestern edge of Koons Road, was another cooperative effort involving the National Weather Service, Pasco Emergency Management and USF, Merz said.

Now, he wants more opportunities to place these "storm soldiers" along the Gulf coast-

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line. The new ones were a hit at the recent Governor's Hurricane Conference in Tampa, and some attendees toured the gauge area in Tarpon Springs, Merz said.

"To populate the coastline with the buoys and gauges is to provide better advanced warning," Merz said.

The latest buoy is in 21 meters of water and measures wind patterns and barometric pressure, among other things. Merz said the data received is already helping boaters with better forecasts of what is happening offshore.

The buoy also can benefit situations like search and rescue or cleanup on oil spills because it measures the direction and speed of Gulf currents.

The Brasher Park tide gauge stands 40 feet above the water and six to seven feet under, Merz said. It is peppered with \$25,000 worth of equipment

including a wind-measuring device 34 feet in the air and a pipe that can measure up to 15 feet of storm surge. A battery recharged by a solar panel runs it.

The equipment relays data by satellite to the USF campus in southern Pinellas County, Merz said. There it is checked and then sent to the weather service office in southern Hillsborough County. Soon, the Pasco Office of Emergency Management will be tapped into the system to get up-to-date information, too, Merz said.

The measurements taken by the buoy and gauge system are available to the public at the COMPS Web site at comps.marine.usf.edu/

Reporter Christopher Martinez contributed to this report.