



TEXAS EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT ONLINE

2016 Vol. 63 No. 5

The Texas Division of Emergency Management is accepting article submissions for The Texas Emergency Management Online (TEMO) newsletter. If you have an idea for a topic or would like to submit an article, contact [Mike Jones](#) at 512-424-7050.

MESSAGE FROM THE CHIEF – May 2016



Over the years, one recurring theme for this publication has been addressed over and over: Severe weather in Texas, how quickly it can develop and how it very often catches many Texans off guard.

As this issue of the Texas Emergency Management Online newsletter was being produced, heavy rain and flooding was occurring in many areas of the state, especially in the southeast. Severe thunderstorm as well as flash flood watches and warnings were in place and the State Operations Center was activated.

Over the two days of Sunday and Monday, April 17-18, 2016, people around the Houston area saw more rain and flooding than they have since the likes of Tropical Storm Allison in 2001. Nine people died and the country's fourth largest city came to a standstill.

Another recurring theme of this publication has attempted to address and stress the issue of people continuing to drive around barricades and getting swept away in floodwaters. Most every person in Texas, young and old, surely has heard of the motto, "Turn Around Don't Drown®." Yet, people still continue to disregard their safety and the safety of our first responders by ignoring flood warnings.

Finally, few weather events evoke a more deadly and destructive image in our minds than a tornado. Although tornadoes can occur at any time of the year, more deadly tornadoes have struck in Texas in May than any other month. The best way to protect yourself and your family is to learn how to survive the dangers of tornadoes and other severe weather threats in Texas.



Tornado Safety

[All About Tornadoes](#)

[Severe Weather Awareness](#)

[Home Remodeling and Repair Guidance](#)

[National Weather Service's Storm Prediction Center](#)

[Surviving Disaster: How Texans Prepare](#)

Wildfire

It may be strange to think about wildfire awareness after all the heavy rain and flooding we've experienced over the past several months. But all the rain creates lush vegetation, and the imminent searing Texas heat can quickly turn that lush vegetation into fuel.

Wildfire awareness and safety is for all Texans, and it has become a year-round task. According to the Texas A&M Forest Service, people start 95 percent of all wildfires in Texas, and over 80 percent of those wildfires occur within two miles of a community. With our population growth, urban area wildfires are becoming more and more common and dangerous. When the conditions are right, it doesn't take much for a tossed cigarette, a hot exhaust, an unwatched campfire or a number of other things to ignite a major wildfire.

Take time now to make or update your [Wildfire Action Plan](#) and to ensure that you, your family and your community are ready to act in the event of a wildfire.

[Ready, Set, Go!](#)

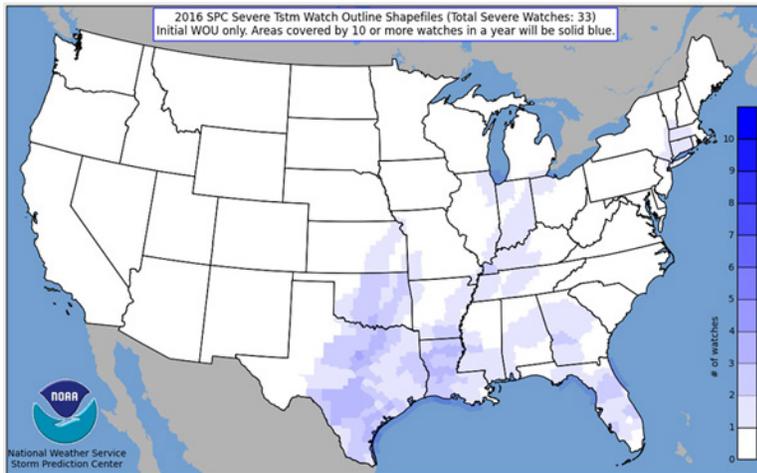
[Be Ready! Be Firewise!](#)

[Texas A&M Forest Service - Wildfire Danger](#)

[TDEM Wildfire Awareness](#)

The Spring Weather Outlook

Severe Weather Season



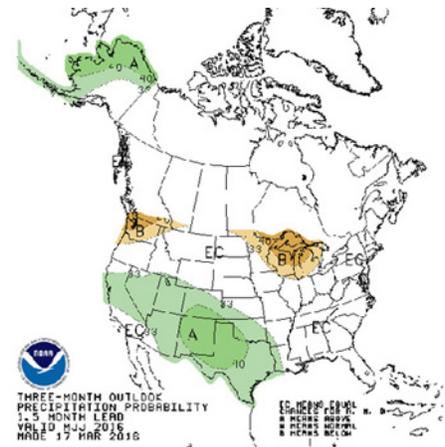
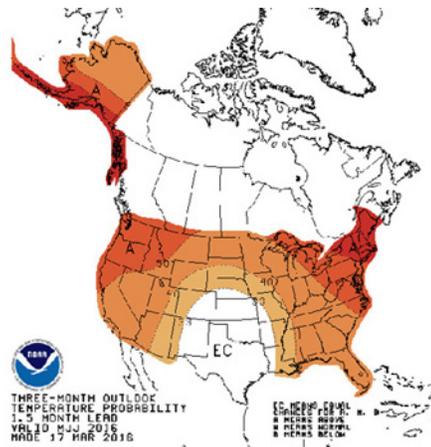
The Texas severe weather season has been fairly active, after getting an early start with multiple reports of large hail across East Texas on January 8. Late February saw storms track across South Texas before multiple events occurred through the month of March. Five tornadoes, hail and damaging wind stretched across the state on the March 8 from the Rio Grande to the D/FW Metroplex. North and Central Texas continued to be active in terms of

severe weather throughout the rest of March with numerous hail and damaging wind events. The second half of April saw another uptick in severe weather with severe storms in the Panhandle, wind and tornadoes in the D/FW Metro, large hail in the San Antonio area, and more flooding in Houston. Based on the storm reports from the Storm Prediction Center in Norman, Oklahoma, we have seen at least 14 tornadoes in Texas so far in 2016.

Looking forward into May, the Climate Forecast System (CFS) model is suggesting development of another active period. Although the main focus of the severe weather looks to be across the Central Plains, the CFS model does hint at more severe weather activity from North Texas down into South Central Texas. While the vast majority of severe weather reports have been for severe hail and damaging winds through the first three months of the year, the peak tornado season for most areas of the state is yet to come, during the months of April and May. In addition to severe weather, the late spring is traditionally the beginning of flash flood season.

Three-Month Outlook

The most recent three-month outlook covers the period of May through July. The graphics from the Climate Prediction Center (CPC) show an equal chance for temperatures to be above/below normal, and a 30-40 percent chance of having above-normal

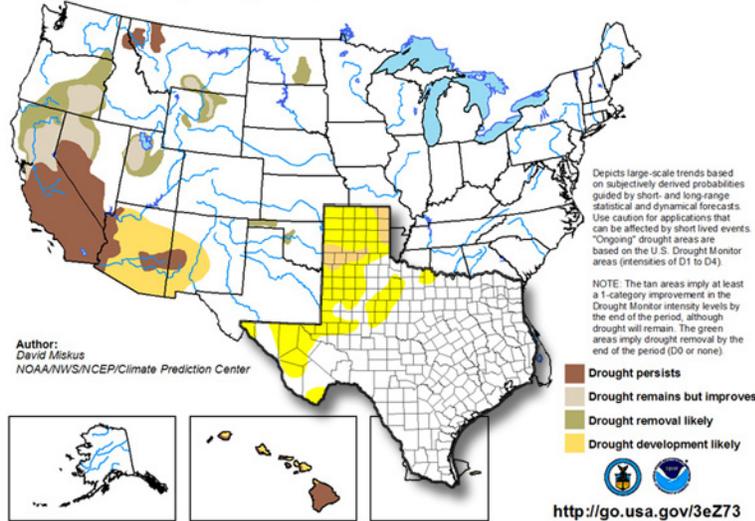


precipitation. For the year-to-date precipitation across Texas (as of the beginning of April) most areas are near normal. Areas of the Panhandle and West Texas have only 50 to 70 percent of normal precipitation so far this year, with East Texas and parts of Central and South Texas two to eight inches above normal. A new one-month climate outlook will be available for May from the CPC on May 1. All of the graphics can be accessed from their homepage: [NWS Climate Prediction Center](http://www.weather.gov/climate).

Drought

U.S. Seasonal Drought Outlook Drought Tendency During the Valid Period

Valid for March 17 - June 30, 2016
Released March 17, 2016



As of April 26, 2016 U.S. Drought monitor, over 85 percent of the state of Texas is drought free! With the recent precipitation across the Texas Panhandle, some areas are seeing decreased drought while the eastern Panhandle has seen a sliver of severe drought added. These are some of the same areas that currently have below-normal precipitation for the year. The Seasonal Drought Outlook produced by CPC shows that Texas is colored white. This is good news as CPC does not expect any large drought development over Texas through the end of June. It is important

to note that the outlook is a general overview, and might not pick up short-lived events, similar to the flash drought we saw last fall. With near-normal precipitation over most of the state so far and above-normal precipitation possible through July, the state looks in good shape when it comes to avoiding drought conditions.

El Niño

El Niño has begun to weaken, and this trend is expected through the spring. Most of the climate models now show neutral ENSO conditions by the summer with some hinting at La Niña developing late this summer into fall. More information is to come on the summer and tropical outlooks in later Texas Emergency Management Online articles, so stay tuned!

The big question for parts of Texas might be, "What happened to the wet and cool winter we were expecting with El Niño?" Here are a few reasons why we didn't see that, compiled by Meteorologist Larry Hopper of the Austin/San Antonio Weather Forecast Office:

1. While El Niño tilts the odds towards a wetter/cooler winter, Texas still tends to be drier and warmer 30-40 percent of the time during an El Niño winter.
2. The lack of Arctic outbreaks decreased the number of freezes.
3. The storm tracks—the polar and subtropical jets—took the storms away from our area, with the polar jet shifting north, and the subtropical jet shifting south and east.

While most of January and February were dry across the state the other fall and winter months—October, November, December, and March—saw above average precipitation from Central Texas north to the Red River and East Texas.

Rebuilding the Fischer Store Road Bridge

During the 2015 Memorial Day weekend, a flood of historic proportions struck the Wimberley Valley area. Overnight rainfall of up to 13 inches fell onto an already saturated Blanco River watershed, poured into the Blanco River and moved downstream toward Wimberley at unprecedented levels. The raging Blanco River ultimately surged to 44 feet, crushing the previous record of 32 feet set in 1926. Hundreds of homes were swept from their foundation and destroyed in the rushing water. Twelve people were killed during the flood, and a vital bridge that crossed the Blanco River was floated off of its pillars and demolished in the river below.

Fischer Store Road connects Ranch Road 32 to Ranch Road 2325, one of the few major roads into Wimberley and on to US Highway 290 into Austin. The loss of the bridge cut off an essential part of the county's transportation network, causing public safety and quality of life issues for hundreds of families in southwestern Hays County. Families on the southwestern side of the bridge could no longer commute to the Wimberley Valley without a 50-mile detour, which took them through Comal and Blanco counties first. The effects of this loss of infrastructure were felt by not only the citizens, but also by the schools and businesses in the areas along with the county's emergency responders.



Destroyed Fischer Store Road bridge looking west.

During the weekend of the flood, state and federal officials visited the area to survey the damage, offering their resources and pledging to do whatever necessary to rebuild this vital link. Through a partnership between Hays County and the Texas Department of Transportation (TxDOT), construction on the bridge began in November 2015. The estimated completion date of May 2016 was ambitious, but, through extraordinary efforts, work was finished three months early. With TxDOT persistence and round-the-clock work by the Dan Williams Company, the bridge opened to traffic on February 23, 2016.



The new bridge over the Blanco River.

Hays County hosted and Precinct 3 Commissioner Will Conley presided over the celebration of the grand opening of the new Fischer Store Road Bridge on February 26, 2016, which was attended by over 300 area residents and representatives from local and state agencies. Texas Lieutenant Governor Dan Patrick, State Senator Donna Campbell, TxDOT Commissioner Will Conley and Hays County Judge Bert Cobb were all on hand to speak and celebrate with the community for this much anticipated event.

The Memorial Day Flood was a tragic event for Wimberley and Hays County. The scars remaining on the area will be visible for many years to come. Bridges have been unavoidable metaphors of life, and rebuilding the Fischer Store Road Bridge and opening it to the community was more than just a transportation project. It is a symbol of the resilience of this community, its county and its state. As Texas Transportation Commissioner Jeff Austin said, it was "through our collaboration and

partnership with Hays County and the state of Texas that we were successful on this project.”



New London School Disaster

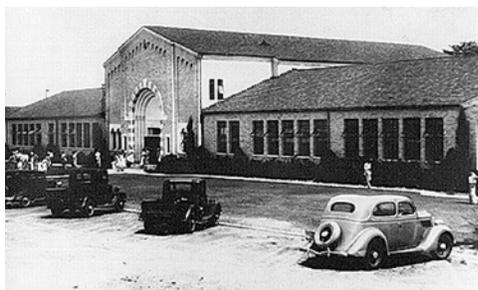
"Someday soon ... there will be no one alive who has ever known me. That's when I will be truly dead - when I exist in no one's memory." - Irvin D. Yalom

While most of the country in 1937 was still mired in the Great Depression, East Texas was feeling all of the benefits of an oil boom. People from around the country were moving here to take jobs at the oil fields, and there were plenty available. After oil was discovered in Kilgore, the population quickly swelled from about 800 people to over 10,000. People lived in tents, in cars and in shacks made from discarded cardboard and pallets. Buildings in downtown Kilgore, including the main bank building, were being razed in order to erect oil derricks. Ultimately, over 1,200 crowded derricks stood within the city limits.

Thanks to revenues from its own interests in the oil wells, nearby New London had developed a 21-acre school campus that included the elementary school, a gymnasium and a lighted football field. Just completed was a modern, state-of-the-art combined junior/senior high school. The new two-story school was a shining example of educational technology and opportunity. It contained a fully-equipped chemistry lab, an auditorium with a balcony and an industrial arts workshop.



Crowded replica oil derricks at Kilgore's World's Richest Acre Park.



New London School before the explosion.

To heat the building, the school district had tapped into the oil fields "green" gas instead of buying natural gas from the local utility company. Acquiring the waste gas in this way was a common practice for the area at the time. The free gas was colorless, odorless and powered the boilers that heated the school.

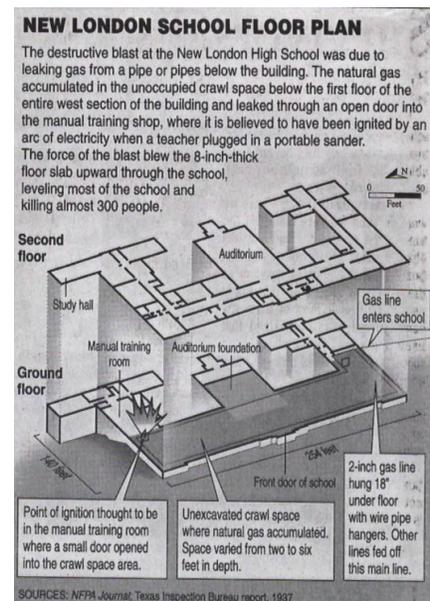
On the afternoon of March 18, 1937, just before school was to let out, a shop teacher started up one of the machines. An electrical spark ignited a mass of the gas that had accumulated in the large, nearly sealed crawl space under the school building. Eyewitnesses said the building looked as if it lifted into the air and then

smashed to the ground. The massive blast, which was heard four miles away, blew the concrete foundation up through the two stories of the building, which settled into a pile of concrete, steel and plaster rubble. Entwined in the rubble were hundreds of school kids, teachers and visitors to the school that day.

The event at New London is still the worst school disaster in American history. The final dead count stands at 294; 270 of those were students in grades five through eleven.

Mere minutes following the explosion, people rushed to the grim site to begin searching bare handed through the rubble trying to recover victims. Frantic parents flocked to the school, searching for news of their children. As word spread, the roads leading to New London were jammed with people trying to get to the site.

At first, debris was removed in peach baskets, but soon after, oilfield workers brought heavy machinery to the site. Texas Governor James Allred dispatched Texas Rangers



and Highway Patrol officers to the area, and they, along with units from the National Guard, brought a sense of order to the confusion at the ever-crowding site.

Another brand new building in nearby Tyler had just opened its doors the day before and was planning an opening celebration. Mother Frances Hospital canceled those plans and began taking in victims from the explosion. Doctors, nurses and embalmers from Dallas soon arrived to join the grim work at hand. Many accounts of the day of the people working at the site recall that most everyone searched in silence; few words spoken. Within the main blast area, most of the sad recovery included mangled bodies, body parts and "other bits."



The search continued through the night.

When night fell, work continued under a light rain and floodlights. Most buildings in the area had been made into a make-shift morgue or field hospital. Walter Cronkite was a young reporter for UPI at the time. He spent four days at the site filing stories, which were being broadcast around the world. He said this about the scene, "Grief was everywhere. Almost everyone you ran into had lost a member of his family. Yet they went about doing everything they could to help each other. The men were digging out the bodies and removing the rubble while the women were helping the injured and supplying coffee and meals for the workers."

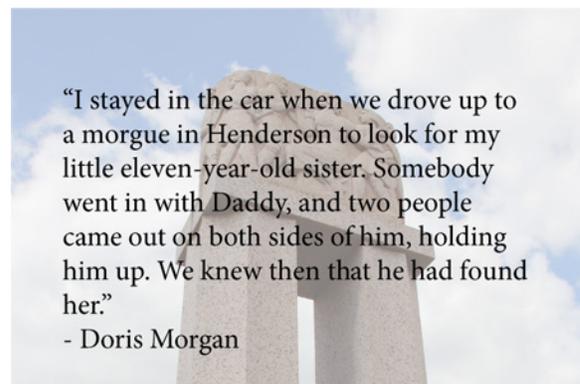
The initial search and cleanup at the site was finished in 17 hours, but the search for the many parents looking for their children lasted days. Identification was excruciatingly difficult. In many cases, victims were identified by a shoe they wore, a keepsake pin or personalized pocket knife.



"We went to as many funerals as we could. There were three or four every hour."
-Marjorie Kinney

In the aftermath of the explosion, moms and dads were frantically trying to find their children, hopefully in one of the hospitals nearby. If they had no luck there, they searched the make-shift morgues. Unfortunately, most of the remains of the victims were indescribable and unidentifiable. One of the stories often told at the museum is a typical description of how a mothers and fathers identified their children at the morgues.

The morning of the explosion, one mom was finishing up a shirt she was making for her son. He saw it and wanted to wear it that day, but she said no. It wasn't finished, and she hadn't sewn on the buttons. He convinced her to let him wear it without any buttons. Apparently, there had been another boy who also wore a shirt made of the same material. This mom felt along the seams and cuffs of the shirt and knew it was her son, because there were no buttons.



"I stayed in the car when we drove up to a morgue in Henderson to look for my little eleven-year-old sister. Somebody went in with Daddy, and two people came out on both sides of him, holding him up. We knew then that he had found her."
- Doris Morgan

They drove from one hospital to another hoping to find living children and from one morgue to the other for their dead. Once the funerals began, they were held around the clock. Pall bearers went from one service to the next, and choir members raced from one funeral to the other to sing a hymn for the families.

The incident was an international story. School children from as far away as Japan and Brazil mailed hand-written cards and letters to New London. Telegrams offering condolences were received from dignitaries and national and international heads of state. Others sent monetary donations at what level they could afford.

Experts from the U.S. Bureau of Mines were sent to the site, where they determined that the connection to the tapped in gas line was faulty. Lawsuits were filed against the school district and the gas company that supplied the tapped line, but the court found that neither could be held responsible. The school superintendent, W. L. Shaw was forced to resign. (His son was killed in the explosion.)



The headstone of Clifton "Sambo" Shaw, son of Superintendent, W. C. Shaw at the Pleasant Hill Cemetery.

Work on a new school began almost immediately. Students attended classes in make shift rooms in other buildings on the campus. The new school opened in 1939 and soon the first graduating class received their diplomas in a new auditorium. After that, practically no one talked about the incident for over 40 years. For most who had survived, who had lost children and who had searched the site, it was too painful. But in 1977, searchers and families of those lost finally held a reunion in New London. Although still very painful, they were finally talking about their experiences and how March 18, 1937 affected their lives since. Even some wrongly held guilt for some survivors was assuaged.

In one classroom, a boy wanted to sit by his girlfriend for the few final moments of class. He asked another girl to swap seats with him, which she did. That girl was killed in the explosion; he survived. For forty years the boy carried the guilt he felt for that girl's death. At the first reunion he mustered the courage to speak to the girl's brother, telling him how he had switched seats and how he had carried that with him for so long. The brother told him to release that guilt. He had done nothing to cause his sister's death.

As a result of the New London School Disaster, the 45th Texas Legislature passed House Bill 1017 that was signed by Governor James Allred in 1937. The bill gave the Texas Railroad Commission the authority to adopt rules pertaining to the odorization of natural gas. In late July 1937, the Commission began enforcing the rules it adopted.

Today, injecting natural gas with an odor or "stench" is an international practice.

Special thanks to J. M. Jones and Patsy Williams, at the [New London Museum](#). Ms. Williams' father was one of the men who worked for hours on the rubble pile searching for victims and survivors of the explosion. She is a thorough and gracious tour guide at the museum.



Above and above right: Erected in 1939, this granite cenotaph sits in the median of State Highway 42 in front of the new school. All the names of the victims are listed.

Right and below: 112 victims are buried at the Pleasant Hill Cemetery on State Highway 323, five miles from New London. Many gravesites have multiple victims of the explosion.



May 2016 News Briefs

USGS LAUNCHES REAL-TIME FLOOD MONITORING WEBSITE



U.S. Geological Survey launched a new web-based program to give users real-time information about water levels, forecasts and emergency situations across the state.

The Texas Water Dashboard combines USGS water measurements with National Weather Service forecasts to allow users to use social media and mobile devices to get a live look at the conditions in their area and what to anticipate.

The dashboard is currently a webpage that allows Texas residents a customized view of their location. Users can add layers to the map that show rainfall forecasts, severe weather watches and more.

Additionally, the program includes two twitter feeds, @USGS_TexasFlood and @USGS_TexasRain that automatically update when water levels rise or drop to certain levels.

The program went live Thursday and Pearson said there are plans to add an app for mobile access in the future. Currently, mobile users can access the site on a phone's browser, but may not be able to access all of the functionality.

A release from the USGS described the program as:

"A cutting-edge map that provides critical current water information and NWS forecast data at your fingertips on a desktop, smartphone or other mobile device. This is a first-generation product that brings real-time USGS data together in a web mashup with information from the NWS and other sources. The USGS will explore the potential value of this product to the public, and could possibly expand its reach to include the rest of the nation in the future."

[USGS Texas Water Dashboard.](#)

Information from KVUE Austin

SNAKE SIGHTINGS INCREASE AS SEASON GETS ACTIVE



western diamondback rattlesnake

Snake sightings are being reported across Texas. The most active snakes right now include the venomous western diamondback rattlesnake in the Austin area.

It's breeding season for most species and our daytime temperatures are not too hot.

Experts suggest that:

- make sure tall grass is mowed
- be diligent in checking yards before letting pets and children play
- if you see a snake, always walk away or spray it with a garden hose

Some Texans mistake the non-venomous rat snake as a rattlesnake because the rat snake vibrates its body and makes a similar sound.

People can understand that we can live alongside these animals and there are ways to keep yourself safe and still allow the snakes to exist.

The venom is used in medical research for cancer, high blood pressure, stroke and more. It's also used to make the rattlesnake vaccine for dogs.

If you suffer a snake bite, call 9-1-1 immediately. Medical personnel, such as EMS, can rate the severity of the bite and if you require antivenin as well as assess the risk of anaphylactic shock. EMS can call ahead to the hospital to prepare it, which takes about twenty minutes.

[Texas Parks and Wildlife Snake Education](#)

Information from KEYE-TV Austin

FEMA RECOVERY ASSISTANCE FOR SEVERE WEATHER IN TEXAS

Register and apply for assistance by calling FEMA at 1-800-621-3362 or 1-800-462-7585 (hearing impaired) or visiting www.disasterassistance.gov. Call center hours: are 7:00 AM – 10:00 PM CST

Recent Presidential Declarations

For information on disaster assistance for the **March 2016** severe weather, please follow this [link](#).

For information on disaster assistance for the **May 2015** severe weather, please follow this [link](#).

For information on disaster assistance for the **October 2015** severe weather, please follow this [link](#).

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HURRICANE PREPAREDNESS WEEK

#ItOnlyTakesOne

#HurricaneStrong

Hurricane Preparedness Week is May 15 – 21, 2016. It only takes one storm to change your life and community. Tropical cyclones are among nature’s most powerful and destructive phenomena. If you live in an area prone to tropical cyclones, you need to be prepared. Even areas well away from the coastline can be threatened by dangerous flooding, destructive winds and tornadoes from these storms. [The National Hurricane Center](#) and the [Central Pacific Hurricane Center](#) issue watches, warnings, forecasts, and analyses of hazardous tropical weather.

Hurricane Preparedness Week (May 15-21, 2016) is your time to prepare for a potential land-falling tropical storm or hurricane. Learn how with the daily tips below and related links. Share these with your friends and family to ensure that they're prepared.

[Weather-Ready Nation – Hurricane Preparedness](#)

May 2016: Credits

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