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## Hurricane Rita vs. Laura

*National Weather Center Meteorologist on the Catastrophic Impact Laura Had on BECI's Service Territory*

**DeRidder — By Cheré Coen** - As Hurricane Laura approached the Louisiana coast on Aug. 26, emergency officials urged evacuations because of a possible massive storm surge that could flood Lake Charles and surrounding areas. Because of the threat of flooding at the National Weather Service office, Warning Coordination Meteorologist Roger Erickson headed to an emergency operations center located near the Lake Charles Civic Center.

Erickson and others who rode out the storm there in the early hours of Aug. 27 wore masks and social distanced themselves in various offices because of COVID-19, Erickson explained. Erickson landed in a small office on the second floor.

“After midnight, I heard creaking sounds behind me like someone was in a rocking chair,” he said. “At first it was once every 10 seconds, then every five seconds, then every second. My boss arrived and he heard it too. We figured that the exterior wall and windows were breathing in and out, trying to blow out.”

Not long after, the building's water ceased, creating unsanitary conditions and causing the air conditioner to fail.

“Now, I'm in a room getting hot, walls and windows are creaking,” he related. “There's no water. Three minutes later, I'm feeling nauseated. I noticed everything on the table was shaking. I thought I was in an earthquake. The whole room was shaking.”

What Erickson felt was the result of a Category 4 hurricane blasting into the area with 150 mile-per-hour winds, the strongest hurricane to hit Louisiana since the 1850s.

“I texted my fiancé and I told her I loved her,” he said.

For those who lived through Hurricane Rita in September 2005, a powerful Category 5 hurricane that weakened to Category 3 upon landfall in Johnson Bayou, it was hard to imagine a tropical cyclone more powerful. Rita's storm surge destroyed much of the Louisiana coast and its winds that reached 120 miles per hour wreaked havoc on homes and power lines throughout southwest Louisiana and southeast Texas. The storm's remarkable low pressure recorded on Sept. 21, 2005, made it the strongest Gulf of Mexico hurricane ever recorded and one of the strongest Atlantic cyclones to date, according to the National Weather Service.

Erickson believes Laura topped Rita's strength upon impact. Laura hit the coast as a Category 4 storm, just shy of being Category 5, and moved so quickly northward that her 150 mile-per-hour winds remained as it moved through Lake Charles and the Beauregard service area.

“Because Laura was moving so fast, it didn't weaken as it should have,” Erickson said. “It was at least a Category 3 as it was going through Beauregard Parish. We're saying 120 mile-per-hour winds at that point. It was still a major hurricane as it was going through the Beauregard region.”

According to Erickson, wind speed increases exponentially, so the 30 mile-per-hour difference between Hurricane Rita in 2005 and Hurricane Laura this year means that Laura was four times worse “from a wind damage perspective.”

Rita also veered west after landfall, turning toward southeast Texas. Laura headed straight north after coming ashore at Grand Chenier, even hitting Shreveport as a Category 1 storm, another first for the state. The

western half of the Beauregard Electric service area took the brunt of Rita, while most of the cooperative's seven parishes have been impacted from Laura, Erickson explained.

BECi's region is also heavily wooded, due to large sections being rural, so tree damage was severe, resulting in massive power outages.

Not only was Laura tied as one of the worst to hit Louisiana, it's likely one of the most powerful hurricanes to make landfall in the United States.

"From a wind speed perspective," Erickson said, "this will probably be No. 3 of all time."

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