

**Ben Hill County
Pre-Disaster Mitigation Plan**

Chapter 1

Introduction

I. Purpose and Need, Authority and Statement of Problem, Purpose of the Plan

Purpose and Need

Each year weather-related disasters in the United States cause approximately 500 deaths and approximately \$14 billion in property damage. As the nation's communities continue to expand, carrying with them physical development farther across the landscape, the number of lives and value of property in the path of natural hazards increases significantly. In the September 20, 2004 issue, Newsweek magazine included an analysis of the 2004 hurricane season, in which four major hurricanes (Charley, Frances, Ivan, and Jeanne) struck portions of Florida and Georgia with devastating results. Destroyed homes and businesses, numerous injuries and deaths, and thousands of displaced families all resulted from the fury of Mother Nature. And, according to Newsweek, things may get even worse, suggesting that we are now entering a cycle of very active storm activity that may last a decade or more. Consequently, the loss of life and property suffered by victims has increased with each disaster, and survivors of these calamities turn to government for redress, increasing the financial burden placed on the nation's taxpayers. In an effort to reduce such losses communities are being prompted to identify how, where and why they are susceptible to natural disasters, and take measures to mitigate, or reduce/eliminate exposure to them and the loss of life and property that so frequently occurs.

To encourage such pre-planning, Congress passed the Disaster Mitigation Act of 2000 (DMA 2000), which requires every community to have an approved Pre-Disaster Mitigation Plan in order to receive federal financial disaster assistance after November, 2004. To assist Ben Hill County and the City of Fitzgerald in meeting this requirement and ensuring their continued eligibility to receive federal disaster assistance, the Office of Homeland Security - Georgia Emergency Management Agency (OHS-GEMA) awarded the county a planning grant in August, 2004, to develop a multi-jurisdictional plan complying with the requirements of DMA 2000. The Ben Hill County Pre-Disaster Mitigation Plan is the result of many months of research, analysis, and discussion.

Authority and Statement of Problem

The development of the Ben Hill County Pre-Disaster Mitigation Plan was authorized by the Ben Hill County Board of Commissioners upon acceptance of the OHS-GEMA grant in August, 2004. Following the guidelines set out by OHS-GEMA, the Commission appointed the Ben Hill County Pre-Disaster Mitigation Plan (PDMP) Committee and empowered this committee to oversee the development of the plan.

The following mission statement best states both the problem and the challenge being addressed by this plan: **“To make the citizens, businesses, communities and local governments of Ben Hill County and the City of Fitzgerald less vulnerable to the effects of natural hazards through the effective study of hazard mitigation, hazard risk assessments, wise floodplain management and a coordinated approach to mitigation policy through state, regional and local planning activities.”**

Purpose of the Plan

The purpose of this plan is to serve as a guide for community leaders as they make decisions regarding the investment of resources to reduce the danger poised by natural hazards. Through the extensive planning process that has been utilized, the community’s goals, objectives, tasks, and action steps reflect the “plan of action” that community leaders can follow to best protect Ben Hill County’s citizens and property from danger.

II. Local Methodology, Brief Description of the Planning Process, Participants in Planning Process

Local Methodology

To meet the requirements and goals of the OHS-GEMA planning grant, and the requirements of DMA 2000, the Ben Hill County Board of Commissioners appointed the Ben Hill County PDMP Committee to conduct research, and to recommend the goals, objectives, tasks, and action steps of the plan. The Commissioners also appointed the Director, Ben Hill County EMA, to coordinate the work of the committee, with the staff assistance of the South Georgia Regional Development Center. The RDC also assisted the committee with hazard and critical facility data collection and research, input of critical facility data into the Critical Facility Inventory database developed for OHS-GEMA by the University of Georgia’s Information Technology Outreach Services (ITOS) department, and drafting of the final plan document.

Brief Description of the Planning Process

Once the committee members were confirmed (see next section for membership), a county-wide kick-off meeting was held October 19, 2004 to review the requirements of DMA 2000 and the planning process that would be used to develop the county’s plan. Representatives of the county and City of Fitzgerald were invited, as well as members of the committee, neighboring communities, local and regional agencies involved in hazard mitigation activities, agencies that have authority to regulate development, and representatives of business, academia and private and non-profit organizations.

The committee met again on November 16, 2004 to develop the local hazard, risk and vulnerability (HRV) assessment based on review of historical weather data for Ben Hill County available from numerous sources (see Appendix D). Utilizing the OHS-GEMA Worksheets (see Appendix D), the committee finalized the HRV assessment and identified the following natural hazards to be addressed in the plan: Hurricanes/Tropical Storms,

Tornadoes, Flood, Lightning, Wildfire, Extreme Heat, and Drought. The committee also determined that a Hazardous Materials Release as a result of a transportation accident should also be addressed as a technological hazard.

The committee then met on December 15, 2004 and February 3, 2005 to review the critical facilities data, and to develop the plan's goals, objectives, tasks, and action steps.

Two publicly advertised hearings were held, the first on February 3, 2005 to inform the general public of the planning effort, to provide a status report and to invite comment and participation. The second public hearing was held June 21, 2005, prior to formal presentation of the draft document to the Ben Hill County Board of Commissioners. The only attendance at the two hearings consisted of committee members active in plan preparation. In addition to the public notice for the meeting, invitations were sent to each surrounding county and municipal unit of government encouraging their attendance and participation.

The South Georgia Regional Development Center assisted the committee with data collection, research and analysis, facilitated all committee meetings and public hearings, compiled an extensive digital data base from the ITOS Critical Facility Inventory database, including GPS collection of critical facilities, and compiled the final written document. The RDC was also responsible for ensuring consistency of the mitigation strategy with the data from the other plans and studies reviewed as part of this process:

- Greater Ben Hill County Comprehensive Plan
- Ben Hill County Local Emergency Operations Plan (LEOP)
- South Georgia Regional Comprehensive Plan
- Willacoochee River Project 319 (DNR)

In particular, land uses and development trends were reviewed to identify mitigation options for each hazard and for consideration in future land use decisions, as well as to identify mitigation activities and projects already included in the comprehensive plan short term work program.

Numerous other sources were used in the course of plan preparation, including the Georgia Department of Natural Resources, Georgia Forestry Commission, Georgia Tornado Database, National Climatic Data Center, National Weather Service, newspaper articles, and interviews with numerous local sources (see Chapter 7).

Participants in the Planning Process

The following members of the Committee participated in the planning process for this plan:

Elected Officials

City/County Managers

EMA Director

Tax Assessors

911 Communication (Ben Hill)

EMS Services

Forestry Commission
Extension Service
Zoning and Inspections
City Water & Light Bond
Schools

Fitzgerald Fire Department
Road Department (City/County)
Sheriff Department
Police Department
City/County Clerks

Objective: Assess risks, identify and profile all potential natural and technological hazards, determine critical facilities and other buildings and structures at risk, assess potential losses, and determine goals, objectives, and action steps.

III. Organization of the Plan

This plan is composed of seven chapters, beginning with this introductory chapter as Chapter 1. A detailed analysis of each of seven natural hazards is presented in Chapter 2. The analysis consists of a description of the hazard and the damage potential, historical frequency and probability of future occurrence, an inventory of assets exposed to the hazard and an estimate of the loss which the community could reasonably be expected to incur, land use patterns as they relate to each hazard, and any aspects of hazards which may be unique. Technological hazards are included in Chapters 3 and 5 of this state-mandated format. Presented in Chapter 4 is an itemized list of goals, objectives, tasks and action steps, which are proposed for implementation to mitigate likely adverse impacts of specific hazard events. Chapter 6 describes how the plan will be implemented and maintained. Chapter 7 is the conclusion. The Appendices include additional data by hazard, including maps and critical facility data, and required documentation.

IV. Local HRV Summary, Local Mitigation Goals and Objectives

Local HRV Summary

As noted above, Chapter 2 identifies and assesses community risks to certain natural hazards and identifies how to reduce exposure to them. The assessment provides the factual basis for activities proposed to reduce losses, including a description of the type, location, and extent of natural hazards deemed most likely to befall Ben Hill County. Reference was made to the historical record to compile information on previous events and for use in estimating the probability of hazard recurrence. Vulnerability includes a summary of past events and their impacts. This is quantified by describing the types and numbers of existing and future buildings, infrastructure, and critical facilities located in identified hazard prone/susceptible areas. The result of this assessment is that Ben Hill County and the City of Fitzgerald are most at risk from the following natural hazards: Hurricanes/Tropical Storms, Tornadoes, Flood, Lightning, Wildfire, Extreme Heat, and Drought. As for technological hazards, Ben Hill County and the City of Fitzgerald are most at risk from a Hazardous Materials Release as a result of a transportation accident.

Local Mitigation Goals and Objectives

Chapter 4 is the local mitigation strategy, composed of goals, objectives, tasks, and action steps developed for each natural hazard as a result of the HRV summary. Chapter 5 is the mitigation strategy for the technological hazard identified in Chapter 3.

The mitigation strategy is designed to include activities and projects that, when implemented, will reduce the threat of loss to property and life resulting from a hazard event. Using the findings from the risk and vulnerability assessment as a guide, Ben Hill County and the Fitzgerald have adopted the following overall community hazard mitigation goals:

Goal # 1: Protect the public health and safety;

Goal #2: Eliminate, or reduce, exposure of critical community facilities to the hazards identified in the community risk assessment;

Goal #3: Where exposure to hazards cannot be limited, implement, to the extent resources are available, the action steps needed to reduce the potential loss of life and property;

Goal #4: Maintain and/or enhance the community's capacity to issue warnings, and respond promptly and effectively in the event of a hazard event.

V. Multi-jurisdictional Special Considerations

This plan has been developed for Ben Hill County and the municipality of Fitzgerald. In general, both of the jurisdictions are equally vulnerable to the natural hazards addressed in this plan, and the mitigation action steps are intended to be undertaken by all jurisdictions. However, special considerations unique to a jurisdiction are noted where applicable.

VI. Adoption, Implementation, Monitoring, and Evaluation

Presented in Chapter 6 is a description of plan implementation, monitoring, evaluation, and update activities, it also identifies who will have authority and responsibility for implementing and coordinating this plan, and for prioritizing projects when applying for funding. This chapter also includes the methodology for evaluating the plan on an annual basis, and meeting the DMA 2000 requirement that the plan be updated every five years.

This section details the process that will ensure the Ben Hill County Pre-Disaster Mitigation Plan becomes an integral part of local government and life in the community.

VII. Copy of Local Resolutions for Plan Adoption

(to be added once adopted)

VIII. Past and Current Hazard Mitigation Projects

Ben Hill County and Fitzgerald have not received funding from OHS-GEMA or FEMA for mitigation projects in the past.

IX. Community Data

Included in Appendix B-III of this plan is a “community snapshot” of Ben Hill County and City of Fitzgerald, profiling the community’s history, demographics, points of interests, and economic data as compiled by the Georgia Department of Community Affairs.