

## **Highlands County All Hazards Guide**

### **Official disaster planning guide for Highlands County**

COVER PHOTO: This image shows the damage and clean-up efforts after an EF-2 tornado struck the Tropical Harbor community prior to Hurricane Milton impacting Highlands County in 2024. This tornado was 130 mph, 300 yards wide, and on the ground for 2.87 miles.

PHOTO CREDIT: HC PIO

## **If disaster struck, would you be ready?**

What about your family? Or your business?

This All-Hazards Guide was developed by your Highlands County Emergency Management and Public Information team. It will help you prepare your family and your property for a variety of potentially significant hazards that you may face here in our community.

This guide is designed to answer many questions you might have when preparing to deal with these natural and man-made disasters. When these hazards occur, the consequences can be devastating if we have not properly prepared ourselves to protect our lives and property.

Most of us realize the importance of preparing for the more significant hazards, such as hurricanes. Many of these preparations are universal for all threats, including a family disaster plan and a disaster supply kit.

Take time to create your family or business disaster plan by using this guide and visit [floridadisaster.org](http://floridadisaster.org) for more tips and information.

## **The Atlantic Hurricane Season is June 1 through Nov. 30.**

### **The season peaks from August to October.**

Starting in 2025, advisory products from the National Weather Service can be issued up to 72 hours in advance of storm surge or tropical storm force winds reaching land. Previously this was 48 hours in advance.

The experimental cone graphic shown here depicting inland U.S. tropical storm and hurricane watches and warnings will continue to be available experimentally for the 2025 hurricane season.

Based on feedback, the color/pattern for an area with both a Tropical Storm Warning and a Hurricane Watch has been added to the legend.

The graphic may not be available as soon as the current cone graphic due to the time need to compile complete inland watch and warning information. It will be available at [hurricanes.gov](http://hurricanes.gov) along with the current operational version of the cone graphic.

Time is the one resource you cannot get more of.

Once a storm is threatening Highlands County, there's only so much time to get ready, get set and protect yourself from the impacts. This guide will help you understand your risk and know what to do and what to expect.

## **TABLE OF CONTENTS**

**READY** – We are at risk: Storm impacts can extend far outside the forecast cone. Know what actions to take based on your risks.

- Create a disaster plan
- Wind
- Flood
- Emergency supplies
- Special needs
- Where to get information
- Evacuate or not?

**SET** – Actions to take: As the storm moves closer and Highlands County is forecast to have impacts, it is time to get set.

- When a storm threatens
- Secure your home
- Public shelters
- Evacuation routes

**PROTECT** – The impacts are here: As conditions become unsafe, you will need to shelter in place. It is not safe to move around during or immediately after a storm.

- Shelter in place
- After the storm passes
- Disaster assistance
- Generator safety
- Debris collection

**OTHER HAZARDS** – Highlands County faces other hazards besides hurricanes. Learn more about these hazards and know what actions to take based on your risks.

- Severe weather
- Wildfire safety
- Home fire safety
- Pandemics
- Hazardous materials
- Cybersecurity
- Acts of terrorism
- Active shooter
- Highlands County contacts

## **Create your disaster plan**

Prevent panic and confusion by making sure everyone knows where to go and what to do in an emergency, whether at home or at school or work.

### **KNOW YOUR RISK**

Learn what disasters might affect Highlands County:

1. Severe weather
2. Tornadoes
3. Flash flooding
4. Hurricanes
5. Hazmat incidents
6. Extreme heat
7. Wildfires
8. Home/business fires
9. Pandemics
10. Cybersecurity

### **PICK TWO MEETING PLACES**

One should be outside your home or business for sudden events such as a fire. The second should be outside your neighborhood, in case you cannot get home, or family members get separated.

### **CHOOSE A CONTACT PERSON**

Ask someone outside of the area to coordinate communications in a disaster. Family members should call this person to report their location. Send your contact copies of important papers (ID, insurance, etc.).

### **UPDATE YOUR CONTACT INFO**

Include contact information in your phones and make emergency contact cards.

### **THINK ABOUT EVACUATION**

If and when you have to evacuate, decide ahead of time where you would go and how you will get there. Ask friends or family if you could stay with them.

Highlands County DOES NOT have designated evacuation zones. If Highlands County issues an evacuation order in the event of a disaster, these orders will NOT refer to designated evacuation zones but instead will refer to geographic boundaries or landmarks.

### **GENERATION PREPARED CHECKLIST**

Know what disasters are most likely in my area

Create a disaster plan for each member of your household

Sign up for your community's emergency alerts: [bit.ly/hbccalert](https://bit.ly/hbccalert)

Create an evacuation plan (from home, work and school)

Practice your evacuation plan and review meeting/rally points

Create a communication plan

Put together a disaster supply kit for home and another for evacuating

Know how to shut off water, power and gas in an emergency

Take a hands-only CPR course

Take a Stop the Bleed course

Take a fire extinguisher course

Attend a preparedness seminar or presentation

Talk to family, friends and co-workers about being prepared

## Wind

Winds in a hurricane can extend out for hundreds of miles beyond the center.

- Winds can range from gusts to continuous hurricane-force speeds.
- Tornadoes can occur during any tropical system.
- Winds can last from a few hours to more than 24 hours.
- Mobile and manufactured homes are very vulnerable to strong winds.

### TIMING:

Stay informed and know when dangerous winds will arrive.

- Evacuation might take more time than usual.
- Emergency response vehicles will stop running when conditions are no longer safe due to wind.

### ACTIONS

If you are on life-sustaining medical equipment

Make a plan to shelter in a location with a backup generator.

Know if your home is strong enough to stay in. Consider:

- The year it was built.
- The materials it was built with.
- The year the roof was replaced.
- Whether you have hurricane-impact windows and/or coverings for windows and doors.

Hurricane categories and potential impacts:

Category	Sustained winds	Types of damage due to hurricane-force winds	Historic storms
1	74-95 mph	<b>Very dangerous winds will produce some damage:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Older (pre-1994 construction) mobile homes could be destroyed, especially if they are not anchored properly. Well-built homes can have damage to roof, shingles, vinyl siding and gutters.</li><li>• Unprotected windows may break if struck by flying debris.</li><li>• Large branches of trees could snap, and shallowly rooted trees may be toppled.</li><li>• Extensive damage to power lines and poles likely will result in power outages that could last a few days to several days.</li></ul>	Hurricane Hermine (2016)
2	96-110 mph	<b>Extremely dangerous winds will cause extensive damage:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Significant damage to all newer mobile homes.</li><li>• Well-built houses could experience major roof and siding damage. Failure of aluminum, screened-in enclosures will be common.</li><li>• Increased chance for uprooted trees and road blockage.</li></ul>	Hurricane Ike (2008)

3 (major)	111-129 mph	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Substantial risk of injury or death to people, pets, and livestock due to flying and falling debris.</li> <li>• Widespread power loss expected. Outages could last several days to weeks.</li> </ul> <p><b>Devastating damage will occur:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Devastating damage to newer mobile homes, while well-built homes and other buildings will experience significant damage.</li> <li>• Many uprooted trees, significant road blockage.</li> <li>• Most commercial signs destroyed.</li> <li>• High risk of injury or death to people, pets, and livestock due to debris.</li> <li>• Electricity and water could be unavailable for days to weeks.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Hurricane Ivan (2004)</b>  <b>Jeanne (2004)</b>  <b>Milton (2024)</b></p>
4 (major)	130-156 mph	<p><b>Catastrophic damage will occur:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Complete destruction to newer mobile homes, catastrophic damage to well-built homes and other buildings.</li> <li>• Residential areas will be isolated by downed trees and power poles.</li> <li>• Nearly all commercial signage, fences, and canopies will be destroyed.</li> <li>• Steel frame in older industrial buildings can collapse.</li> <li>• Electricity and water could be unavailable for weeks to months.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Hurricane Charley (2004)</b>  <b>Frances (2004)</b>  <b>Irma (2017)</b></p>
5 (major)	157 mph or higher	<p><b>Catastrophic damage will occur:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Almost complete destruction of all mobile homes will occur, regardless of age or construction.</li> <li>• High percentage of industrial and low-rise apartment buildings will be destroyed.</li> <li>• High percentage of frame homes will be destroyed.</li> <li>• Nearly all trees and power poles will be downed.</li> <li>• Power and water outages can last for months. Affected areas can be uninhabitable for weeks to months.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Hurricane Andrew (1992)</b>  <b>Michael (2018)</b></p>

## **Flood**

A lot of rain can fall in a short amount of time, with floodwaters creating dangerous conditions.

Walking, wading or driving in floodwaters is extremely dangerous due to the risk of drowning, injury from debris, and potential for infection. Floodwater can carry harmful bacteria, sewage, chemicals, and sharp objects. Even shallow water can be dangerous due to unseen currents and the potential to be swept away.

### **ACTIONS**

Have a plan to protect the items in your home:

- Elevate valuables and furniture in your home.
- Place important documents in waterproof containers.
- Before a storm, check gutters and any storm drains near your home and remove any loose leaves or items that may block drainage.
- Sandbags or other flood barriers may help keep some water out of your home, but not large amounts of rain.
- If heavy rainfall is expected, sandbags may be offered. Check [highlandsfl.gov](http://highlandsfl.gov), and the County's social media accounts.

Using sandbags:

Put a tarp or plastic sheet on the ground at the bottom of the door and make sure it's attached to the door with tape. Stack the bags like bricks in a wall in a zigzag pattern.

Press them down tightly to help keep water out.

## Emergency Supplies

Knowing what to have on hand if you stay home or what to bring if you evacuate is important to plan out. Act now to gather supplies.

### FOR HOME – PLAN FOR 7-10 DAYS:

- Water – one gallon per day, per person
- Non-perishable food
- Waterproof matches
- Can opening
- Extra batteries
- Flashlight
- Fire extinguisher
- Radio
- Pliers or multi-use tool
- Duct tape
- Corded phone
- Whistle
- Toilet paper
- Sturdy shoes

### WHEN EVACUATING (PUT IN YOUR GO BAG):

- Identification and important documents
- Personal hygiene items
- Extra cash, small bills
- Cell phone, charging cords, and power bank
- Medications
- Clothing
- Pet supplies
- Local map

### KEEP IN YOUR CAR:

- Jumper cables
- Road flares and traffic triangles
- Windshield breaker and seatbelt cutter
- Blanket

### FOR PUBLIC OR SPECIAL NEEDS SHELTERS:

- Medications and devices
- First aid kit
- Sunglasses and back-up eyeglasses
- Clothing
- Toys, puzzles
- Personal hygiene items
- Extra cash, small bills
- Water – one gallon per person, per day
- Identification and important documents
- Pet supplies
- Bedding

- Books, crosswords
- Cell phone, charging cords and power bank
- Non-perishable food

## **Special Needs**

Having a plan is critical for your life safety.

Highlands County has a Special Needs shelter available for residents of all ages whose health would quickly and dramatically deteriorate in a risk shelter and have no other safe place to go.

The shelter is for all ELECTRIC DEPENDENT individuals or persons whose medicines/devices require refrigeration/electric power and their caregivers. It is not for the general population.

Specific criteria and requirements must be met to be eligible for the Special Needs shelter.

There are multiple ways to register:

Visit [highlandsfl.gov](http://highlandsfl.gov) > Public Safety > Emergency Management > Special Needs

Call Highlands County Emergency Management at 863-402-7600.

## **ACTION**

Register for the Special Needs Shelter.

Don't wait until an emergency.

**REGISTER NOW!**

## **KEEP IN MIND**

Bring your emergency supplies with you.

Have a plan for where you will go afterward if you cannot return home due to damage.

## **10 questions to ask if your family member resides in an assisted-living facility, or nursing home:**

1. Does the facility have a currently approved Comprehensive Emergency Management Plan? If yes, may I see a copy of the approval letter? If no, ask them why, as it is required.
2. Do you maintain a minimum 72-hour supply of food, water, medications, etc. for each resident?
3. Do you have an emergency generator? If yes, to what does it supply power during a blackout?
4. Under what circumstances would my family member be evacuated?
5. Can my family member be released to me for evacuation?
6. Who will notify me of the impending evacuation of my family member?
7. Whom should I call to receive current information on my family member?
8. What facilities might my family member be evacuated to? Where are they located?
9. Who will notify me that my family member is returning to this facility?
10. If my family member evacuates with me, who do I contact to determine when the facility is open and operating?

## Where to get information

Use trusted sources to stay informed so you stay safe during a disaster.

Alert Highlands is a free emergency notification system.

Get alerts via text, phone and/or emails.

SIGN UP at <http://bit.ly/hcbccalert>

Online updates are available.

Basic information to prepare, up-to-the minute updates during declared emergencies, and information after the emergency can be found at <https://bit.ly/HC-StormUpdates>

To ask a question during an emergency, the following options are available:

County Call Center 863-402-6800

Opens during declared emergencies. Hours vary and will be announced via the County's website, [highlandsfl.gov](http://highlandsfl.gov), Alert Highlands and social media.

Email [pio@highlandsfl.gov](mailto:pio@highlandsfl.gov)

This may be a more convenient option for those who are deaf or hard of hearing. Response times vary during a disaster.

Emergency weather radios

Get automatic alerts from the National

Weather Service (NWS)

- Configure the radio to receive Highlands County alerts only by using the Specific Area Message Encoding (SAME). The SAME code for Highlands County is 012055.
- If the radio does not require a SAME, then tune to frequency 162.500.

Florida Public Radio Emergency Network

Highlands County is covered by five affiliates:

- ~ WUSF 89.7 FM – Tampa/St.Pete
- ~ WMNF 88.5 FM – Tampa/St.Pete
- ~ WGPU 90.1 FM – Ft. Myers/Naples
- ~ WQCS 88.9 FM – Ft. Pierce
- ~ WFIT 89.5 FM – Melbourne

These stations will stay on the air during power outages and continue broadcasting information you need to stay safe.

Tune into an available radio station

Local stations include:

- ~ WWTK AM 730
- ~ WITS AM 1340
- ~ WJCM AM 1050
- ~ WWOJ FM 99.1
- ~ WWLL FM 105.7
- ~ WZSP FM 105.3 (Spanish)
- ~ WRUM FM 100.3 (Spanish)
- ~ WRSO FM 97.9 (Spanish)

Social media

Facebook:

[facebook.com/HighlandsCoEM](https://facebook.com/HighlandsCoEM)

[facebook.com/highlandsfl.gov](https://facebook.com/highlandsfl.gov)

[facebook.com/HighlandsCountyFireRescue](https://facebook.com/HighlandsCountyFireRescue)

[facebook.com/highlandsbusiness](https://facebook.com/highlandsbusiness)

Instagram: [@HighlandsFLBCC](https://instagram.com/HighlandsFLBCC)

Nextdoor: [@HighlandsCounty](https://nextdoor.com/@HighlandsCounty)

YouTube: [www.youtube.com/@highlandscountyboardofcoun6976](https://www.youtube.com/@highlandscountyboardofcoun6976)

## **Should I stay or should I go?**

Use this tool to see if and when you should evacuate during a hurricane.

Do you have special needs?

If you answer yes, consider staying in a special needs shelter, especially if you are dependent on electricity for medical devices/ medications.

If you answer no, ask yourself, do you live in a mobile home and/or is your home in a low-lying area prone to flooding?

If the answer is yes to either question, you should stay with family or friends who live in a brick and mortar structure, at a hotel if you can, leave the area to stay with loved ones, or go to a public risk shelter.

It is not safe to stay in a mobile home because it is vulnerable to high winds.

It is also not safe to stay in your home if the area is prone to flooding.

If you answer no to all three questions and if your home is safe, you may not need to evacuate.

Consider opening your home to friends or family who may be at risk. Staying together means you can help secure the home, share supplies, and support each other through the storm and the days that follow.

## **What to do**

And knowing when to do it is Preparedness 101.

Highlands County Public Information and Emergency Management will use local and regional media outlets to provide frequent updates on the storm, recommend emergency protective actions, and issue evacuation orders. If you do not evacuate when ordered, you may be without fire rescue, law enforcement or emergency medical support after a certain point until the threat subsides.

Stay informed by monitoring trusted information sources.

When a storm threatens our area

- Fill your gas tank or charge electric vehicles.
- Get cash.
- Refill medications.
- Secure your home.
- Get your home and evacuation emergency kits ready.
- If you are registered for the Special Needs shelter, expect a call from the county about assistance.
- Complete final preparations to evacuate or to shelter in your home.
- Stay updated on latest weather forecast and emergency preparations.
- Listen for when shelters may open, and which shelters may open.
- Turn off your utilities if you are leaving your home.
- If your plan is to travel out of the area, leave as early as possible.
- Check on neighbors to make sure they have somewhere safe to stay or see if they need help.

## **Secure your home**

First, get your supplies ready.

Get your plans set to secure your home and protect your family.

Monitor trusted outlets for weather updates.

### **HOUSE:**

- Shut all doors/windows.
- Shutter all doors/windows.
- Lower antennas.
- Lower/remove awnings.
- Bring your pets **INSIDE!**
- Elevate belongings and use sandbags for flooding.
- Before you leave, shut off power breakers, and gas supply to gas appliances.

### **GARAGE:**

- Reinforce the doors with a brace kit or use long steel or aluminum bars.
- Place flood barriers against the bottom of the door(s) to seal the gap.
- Lock the door.

### **VEHICLE:**

- Fill gas tank and/or charge battery.
- Check oil and water.
- Place emergency supplies in the trunk.
- Move to a higher location if you expect flooding (especially for electric vehicles).
- Monitor traffic reports.

### **BOAT:**

- Store your boat on land and secure to trailer.
- Secure loose items.
- Disconnect electric, water, fuel, other dock connections.

### **YARD:**

- At the start of storm season, trim trees and shrubbery.
- Take all yard items inside.
- Clear balconies, steps and porches.
- Pick up/secure loose debris.
- Super-chlorinate your pool.
- Remove debris from your gutters and nearby storm drains if possible.

**SEASONAL RESIDENTS: SECURE YOUR HOME BEFORE LEAVING**

## **Public shelters**

County officials will open shelters on a tiered basis as needed, and not all shelters will be open at the same time. The public **MUST** monitor the County website, [highlandsfl.gov](http://highlandsfl.gov), the County's social media platforms and local media outlets for what shelter locations are open or if shelters are at capacity.

Risk shelters are typically meant to house people for 12-72 hours until the storm or threat passes. Because these shelters must open quickly, it is not possible to provide comfort items to evacuees (such as cots and blankets).

Bring your family's disaster survival kit to ensure proper provisions.

Highlands County has three types of shelters:

### 1. Public risk shelters

Open to all individuals in Highlands County.

No food is provided.

No cots, chairs, air mattress or bedding provided.

### 2. Special Needs shelters

For electric dependent individuals or persons whose medicines/devices require refrigeration/electric power and their caregivers.

To register, go to [highlandsfl.gov](http://highlandsfl.gov) > Public Safety > Emergency Management > Special Needs or call Highlands County Emergency Management at 863-402-7600.

### 3. Pet-friendly shelter

Dogs and cats are kept in a separate location from owners, in a crate or carrier.

The owner must be staying in the shelter to feed and walk their pet.

Pre-registration is required.

To register for the pet-friendly shelter, go to <https://bit.ly/hc-petshelterform>

Highlands County's public shelters are:

Avon Park Rec Center

207 E. State Road, Avon Park

Alan Jay Arena

781 Magnolia Ave., Sebring

Lake Placid High School

202 Green Dragon Drive, Lake Placid

What to expect at public shelters:

Shelters do not provide food, beverages, cots or chairs.

When you arrive, check in with the shelter manager.

If you leave the shelter, check out with the shelter manager.

Bring your family's disaster supplies.

Expect it to be loud.

Weapons and alcohol **ARE NOT ALLOWED**.

## **Shelter in place**

When time has run out and it's no longer safe to leave, it's time to shelter in place.

If flood water is rising in your home:

- Stay inside and have tools, like an axe, handy.
- Before you lose power, report your location to an emergency contact who is out of the area so they can help first responders locate you after the storm.
- Shut off water, gas service and electricity if possible.
- Move to the second floor or higher if needed.
- Stand on top of a counter or substantial piece of furniture to stay above the rising water.

If your home is being damaged by strong winds/tornadoes:

- Close interior door(s) to reduce pressure in your home.
- Go to a safe room: an interior room, closet or hallway away from windows on the lowest level of your home.
- Lie on the floor under a table or other sturdy object, or in a bathtub, if you cannot make it to a safe room.
- Curl up and cover your head with a mattress, helmet or other item if available.
- Do not leave your safe room until you are sure the storm has completely passed.
- It will seem calm as the center, or eye, of the storm passes. Be ready for severe weather to return once the eye passes.

Wait until the storm has passed to check out any possible damage.

There will be a point in time when it is no longer safe to try to leave.

- Winds will continue to gain strength, and, once they exceed 30 miles per hour, conditions will not be safe for anyone to be outside, not even in high-profile vehicles.
- Fire rescue, emergency medical services and law enforcement will not be able to help you.

## **After the storm passes**

Expect normal services to be disrupted.

If the power goes out:

Perishable foods that are not kept cool can spoil. Move perishable foods into an ice-filled cooler.

Food that is in a full freezer can be stored safely for two days if you keep the freezer door shut.

If in doubt, throw it out. Don't trust your sense of smell!

If you have an outside grill, cook any food that is left.

Use nonperishable food.

Run your generator safely.

The water supply may be contaminated:

Assume there is a boil water notice until you hear official news.

Use bottled water to drink, cook with and brush teeth.

To sterilize water:

Boil — Bring a pot of water to a rolling boil for one minute. You can do this outside on your grill OR

Bleach — Add 1/8 teaspoon of unscented bleach per gallon of water and let stand for 30 minutes; bleach should contain 5.25 percent sodium hypochlorite.

There is a sewer outage:

Do not flush your toilet or you could have a sewage backup in your home.

To use the toilet, turn off your outside water supply, flush once, and line with a trash bag. Do not use cat litter in your toilet.

As an option, use a portable toilet or a five-gallon bucket with a tight lid. Line with a heavy-duty trash bag and use household bleach as a disinfectant.

Once service has returned, remove the trash bag from your toilet and dispose of the contents into your regular toilet. Sanitize with bleach.

Phone, cable and cell services are out:

Texting may work when other services do not. Highlands County will send texts through Alert Highlands to relay important information.

Use a solar charger or car charger for your phone.

Tune in to a local radio station to receive information from officials. Some AM radio stations should be transmitting.

By signing up for Alert Highlands, you will receive tips on what to do after the storm and vital recovery information. SIGN UP at <http://bit.ly/hbccalert>

## **DRIVING**

To make sure the roads are as safe as possible, emergency workers need time to clear safe access and secure hazards. Try to stay off the roads as much as possible for AT LEAST 48 HOURS. Please do not go sightseeing.

If you must drive:

If traffic lights are not working, treat an intersection as a four-way stop sign.

Do not drive through standing water and avoid flooded roads and washed out bridges.

Adjust your speed to road conditions.

Maintain a safe distance from the car in front of you.

Use caution around emergency and utility crews.

Obey all "road closed" signs.

Have spare tires or repair kits.

## **POWER**

Power companies will have to assess damages to the power plant, transmission and distribution lines, and substations to determine what can be repaired quickly.

Power restoration will start with the most critical facilities, such as hospitals, 911 call centers and nursing homes.

In the first days of restoration, power may come and go. You can check for power outage information from your power company.

## **DAMAGES**

Do not enter a home that has major damage to the roof and/or walls.

Contact your insurance agent and file your insurance claim as soon as possible. Insurance companies will send special disaster assistance teams, as will the state and federal government. Still, it may be more than a week before those teams are able to get into operation.

Record your damage on the Citizen Damage Reporting tool at [highlandsfl.gov](http://highlandsfl.gov) to help the County assess community wide damage.

Make sure contractors you hire are licensed and do not pay for any services until the work has been completed.

Report the suspicious contractor to authorities to be checked out! If you see unfairly high prices being charged, report it! Local authorities want to help our residents by requiring competence and fairness.

## **CLEAN UP**

Remove wet contents immediately to prevent mold, including carpeting, furniture, bedding and other items holding moisture. They can develop mold within 24 to 48 hours.

Clean and disinfect everything that got wet.

Mud left from floodwater can contain sewage and chemicals.

To see if there are volunteer groups who can help you, sign up for Alert Highlands or visit [highlandsfl.gov](http://highlandsfl.gov).

## **SAFETY TIPS**

Keep kids and pets with you.

Water-damaged power outlets can cause fires. Keep your power off after home flooding until an electrician can take a look.

Avoid downed power lines. Report downed lines to the power company if you are able.

When you arrive home, turn on your gas supply.

Avoid flooded areas and standing water. Do not wade through floodwaters, which could have live power lines, sewage, wildlife and dangerous objects.

Watch for animals and insects that may have moved into your home or onto your property.

Dump standing water to prevent mosquitoes from breeding. Protect yourself from bug bites.

Follow any curfew in place.

To report suspected fraud, call the toll-free Fraud Tip Hotline at 1-800-378-0445 or visit [FraudFreeFlorida.com](http://FraudFreeFlorida.com)

## **Recovery efforts**

In the weeks following a storm, the focus is on recovery.

Take photos of damage and contact your insurance provider as soon as possible.

Highlands County will share information about any federal, state, and local emergency declarations. If Highlands County is included in a federal emergency declaration, additional resources may be available, and you should register for disaster assistance as soon as possible:

- [DisasterAssistance.gov](https://www.DisasterAssistance.gov)
- FEMA mobile app.
- 800-621-3362. If you use 711 or VRS (VideoRelay Service), call 800-462-7585.

## **Generator safety**

Run generators outside and keep generators at least 15 feet away from all windows, doors, and vents.

Never run a generator in the garage, even with the door open, or near an open window, door, or opening into the home.

Place generators so the exhaust fumes point away from any nearby people or homes.

Only operate generators in dry areas away from rain or floodwaters.

Turn off generators and let them cool down before refueling. Never refuel a generator while it is running or hot.

Store fuel for the generator in a container that is intended for that purpose and is correctly labeled as such. Store the containers outside of living areas.

Install carbon monoxide detectors in your home. Make sure the alarm meets current UL 2034 safety standards and check the battery regularly.

NEVER ignore a beeping CO alarm. Go outside and call 911 if the alarm sounds.

Know the symptoms of carbon monoxide poisoning: headaches, dizziness, shortness of breath, nausea, vomiting, fatigue, unconsciousness.

If you feel symptoms of carbon monoxide poisoning, leave right away.

Always have a fully charged, approved fire extinguisher located near the generator.

## **Do you know when gas goes bad?**

In general, pure gas begins to degrade in three to six months, if stored in a sealed and labeled metal or plastic container. Ethanol-gasoline blends have a shorter shelf life of two to three months.

You can safely dispose of old fuel for free at the Highlands County Landfill, 12700 Arbuckle Creek Road, in Sebring.

**Debris collection after a declared disaster**

Before a major storm event, local governments in combination with the state and federal government may declare a state of emergency. Highlands County has private debris collection contractors in place prior to an event.

Typically, after a severe weather event, the County will activate these contractors to collect debris associated with the event. The more severe the damage, the more likely the County is to activate those contractors. Highlands County may make several locations available for disposal of debris for these contractors.

Residents may also choose to take their debris to the Highlands County Landfill at 12700 Arbuckle Creek Road in Sebring. This will be the only location where the public may dispose of debris material themselves. The Board may authorize, at its discretion, to waive tipping fees after federally declared disaster events.

Visit [highlandsfl.gov](http://highlandsfl.gov) to get information about post-storm debris collection, including collection deadlines, after a declared disaster.

## Other Hazards

### Thunderstorms & Lightning

It doesn't have to be raining for lightning to strike. Almost all lightning will occur within 10 miles of its parent thunderstorm, but it CAN strike much farther than that. Lightning detection equipment has confirmed bolts striking almost 50 miles away.

Lightning is the number one cause of weather-related fatalities in Florida, averaging 10 fatalities and 40 injuries a year. Approximately half of the deaths and injuries occur during outdoor recreational activities, and about 40% of those occur on the water.

#### HAZARDS

- large hail
- damaging winds
- flash floods
- tornadoes
- downbursts

#### Where to go

The safest location during a thunderstorm is inside a large, enclosed structure. If no buildings are available, then an enclosed metal vehicle such as an automobile, van or school bus makes a decent alternative.

#### What to do

Once inside a sturdy building, stay away from electrical appliances and plumbing fixtures. You may want to unplug valuable electrical equipment so they will not be damaged. As an added safety measure, go to an interior room. If you are inside a vehicle, roll the windows up, and avoid contact with any conducting paths leading to the outside of the vehicle such as radios, CBs, and the ignition or you could be badly burned if lightning strikes.

#### Where NOT to go

Buildings that have exposed openings like beach shacks, metal sheds, picnic shelters/pavilions, carports, and baseball dugouts, and porches are NOT SAFE, even if they are "grounded."

The following vehicles are NOT SAFE during lightning storms: convertibles, and those that have open cabs, such as golf carts, tractors, and construction equipment. It is not the rubber tires of a vehicle that protect you from lightning. The metal shell of a vehicle gives the electricity from the lightning a path to flow around you.

#### What NOT to do

Lightning can travel great distances through power lines, especially in rural areas. Do not use electrical appliances, including corded telephones and desktop computers, unless it is an emergency. Cordless phones, cell phones, laptop and tablet computers are safe to use. Stay away from the windows and do not take a shower or use the bathtub.

#### What is a downburst?

Downbursts are intense winds caused by air rapidly descending from a thunderstorm and spreading out when it hits the ground. Unlike a tornado, which spins in a circle, downbursts push air straight

down and out — causing wind damage in a straight line. These winds can be just as strong and dangerous as a weak tornado, often knocking down trees, power lines, and damaging structures.

## **Tornado**

What is a tornado?

A tornado is a violent storm with whirling winds of up to 300 miles per hour. It appears as a funnel shaped cloud, from gray to black in color, which extends to the ground from the base of a thunderstorm.

It spins like a top and may sound like the roaring of an airplane or locomotive. In Florida, summer tornadoes generally move at speeds less than 20 mph and can move in any direction.

Winter tornadoes tend to move at speeds less than 40 mph and generally move from the southwest to northeast. Their direction of travel can be erratic and may change suddenly.

These short-lived storms are the most violent of all atmospheric phenomena and the most destructive over a small area.

### **ACTIONS**

- Purchase a NOAA weather radio. See PAGE 9
- Make sure your phone is getting Wireless Emergency Alerts.
- Know the terms used to describe tornado watches and tornado warnings.

Watch vs. warning

Think of it like making tacos.

Tornado watch: We have the ingredients to make tacos.

"Caution, Watch the Sky"

Weather conditions could lead to the formation of severe storms and tornadoes.

**BE PREPARED:** Know your safe location. Be ready to act quickly if a Warning is issued or you suspect a tornado is approaching.

Tornado warning: We are having tacos right now.

"Danger, Take Cover"

A tornado has been spotted or indicated by weather radar, meaning a tornado is occurring or expected soon.

**TAKE ACTION:** There is imminent danger to life and property. Immediately seek shelter in the safest location possible.

## Heat

Heat emergencies are easily preventable by taking precautions in hot weather. If the problem isn't addressed, three types of heat emergencies may occur – heat cramps (caused by loss of salt from heavy sweating) can lead to heat exhaustion (caused by dehydration), which can progress to heatstroke (shock). Heatstroke, the most serious of the three, can cause shock, brain damage, organ failure, and even death.

Heat emergency: caused by loss of salt from heavy sweating, early symptoms include profuse sweating, fatigue, thirst, and muscle cramps.

Heat exhaustion: symptoms include headache, dizziness and being lightheaded, weakness, nausea and vomiting, cool moist skin, and dark urine.

Heatstroke: symptoms include fever, irrational behavior, confusion, dry, hot and red skin, rapid shallow breathing and pulse, seizures and falling unconscious.

Call 911 if:

- The person loses consciousness at any time.
- There is any other change in the person's alertness (for example, confusion or seizures).
- Fever (temp above 104°F)
- The person shows signs of shock (bluish lips and fingernails and decreased alertness).
- Other symptoms of heat stroke are present (like rapid pulse or rapid breathing).
- The person's condition does not improve or worsens despite treatment.

Prevention:

- Wear loose-fitting, lightweight clothing in hot weather
- Rest frequently and seek shade when possible.
- Avoid exercise or strenuous physical activity outside during hot or humid weather.
- Drink plenty of fluids every day. Drink more fluids before, during, and after physical activity.
- Be especially careful to avoid overheating if you are taking drugs that impair heat regulation, or if you are overweight or elderly.

## Wildfire safety

### LEARN BEFORE YOU BURN

Unattended burn piles is a leading cause of wildfires in Florida. Authorization is not required to burn yard waste as long as you meet the required setbacks and there are no local, city or county ordinances in place that prohibit burning. Always check with local officials to find out if any restrictions are in place.

Follow these tips:

- Check the conditions. Don't burn when it's windy or when vegetation is very dry.
- Look up. Choose a safe burning site away from power lines, overhanging limbs, buildings, vehicles, and equipment. You'll need at least three times the height of the pile of vertical clearance.
- Look around. Keep the surroundings watered down during the burn and have a shovel handy.
- Prepare your pile. Clear an area down to bare soil around your pile to prevent it from spreading.
- Keep your piles small and manageable. Add additional debris as the fire burns down.
- If using a burn barrel, make sure it's made entirely of metal, properly equipped (at least three evenly spaced, three-inch, screened vents and metal top screen) and in good condition.
- Always stay with your fire until it is completely out. Drown the fire with water, turn over the ashes with a shovel and drown it again. Repeat several times.
- Check the burn area regularly over the next several days and up to several weeks following the burn, especially if the weather is warm, dry, and windy.
- Make sure smoke does not obstruct visibility on nearby roads.
- Remember, if your fire escapes, you may be liable for costs of suppression and damage to the property and others. The Florida Forest Service administers Florida's outdoor burning and forest fire laws.
- If you see what could be an illegal burn, report it! CALL 9-1-1 to have the fire department come check it out.

### Burn bans

When a burn ban is in place, it applies to THE ENTIRE COUNTY and includes, but is not limited to, all outdoor burning:

- Yard trash, vegetation, grass
- Lumber, trees
- Household paper products
- Debris
- All bonfires, campfires, warming fires, fires in outdoor fireplaces
- Outdoor pyrotechnic displays
- Open cooking fires

Cooking on a contained gas or charcoal grill is allowed.

Activities authorized by Florida Forest Service are allowed.

The Board of County Commissioners approves burn bans, based on information and recommendations from fire officials. Notice is put on the County website and social media platforms and sent to local media and state officials. If conditions improve, the burn ban could be lifted sooner by the Highlands County Fire Chief, who will notify the public via the County's Public Information Office.

Non-compliance is a misdemeanor offense punishable by a fine not exceeding \$500 or by imprisonment by a term not to exceed 60 days in the county jail or both.

## ACTIONS

If a wildfire threatens your neighborhood, do the following:

- Listen to local radio and television stations for wildfire information.
- Evacuate immediately if instructed or if the wildfire is close.
- After the threat is over, do not return until officials declare the area safe and follow these safety measures:
- Use caution when entering burned areas, as hot spots may still exist and can flare up without warning.
- Wet debris down to minimize breathing in dust.
- Do not drink water that you think may be contaminated.
- Discard food that has been exposed to smoke or dust.

## Home fire safety

Plan ahead! If a fire breaks out in your home, you may have only a few minutes to get out safely once the smoke alarm sounds. Everyone needs to know what to do and where to go if there is a fire.

### SAFETY TIPS

- Make a home escape plan. Draw a map of your home showing doors and windows. Discuss the plan with everyone in your home.
- KNOW at least two ways out of every room, if possible. Make sure all doors and windows leading outside open easily.
- HAVE an outside meeting place (like a tree, light pole or mailbox) a safe distance away from the home where everyone should meet.
- PRACTICE your home fire drill at night and during the day with everyone in your home, twice a year.
- PRACTICE using different ways out.
- TEACH children how to escape on their own in case you can't help them.
- CLOSE doors behind you as you leave.

### IF THE ALARM SOUNDS

- If the smoke alarm sounds, GET OUT AND STAY OUT. Never go back inside for people or pets.
- If you have to escape through smoke, GET LOW AND GO under the smoke to your way out.
- CALL 9-1-1 from outside your home.

If you have any doubt about fighting a small fire...

- Just get out! When you leave, close the door behind you to help contain the fire.
- Call 9-1-1 from outside the home.

### HOME FIRE SAFETY CHECKLIST

- Install smoke alarms and carbon monoxide detectors on every level of your home, in every bedroom and sleeping area.
- Set a reminder to test your smoke alarms and carbon monoxide detectors every month.
- Set a reminder to check the batteries in your smoke alarms and carbon monoxide detectors every six months and replace when needed.
- Replace smoke detectors every 10 years.
- Keep at least one fire extinguisher in your home.
- Keep flammable items at least three feet away from the stove, space heaters, and fireplaces.
- Turn off stove if you are going to leave the kitchen, even for a short period of time.
- NEVER smoke in bed.
- Unplug small kitchen appliances when not in use.
- Make sure matches and lighters are out of reach of children.

Training and presentation opportunities are available by calling Highlands County Public Safety at 863-402-7600.

- Fire safety
- Disaster preparedness
- Hands-only CPR
- Stop the Bleed
- Fire extinguisher training

## **Pandemics**

A pandemic is a disease outbreak that spans several countries and affects a large number of people.

An epidemic is a disease that affects a large number of people within a community, population, or region.

Pandemics are most often caused by viruses, like COVID-19, which can easily spread from person to person.

A new virus can emerge from anywhere and quickly spread around the world. It is hard to predict when or where the next new pandemic will emerge.

It is important to remember that emergencies and disasters like hurricanes and wildfires won't stop for a pandemic like COVID-19. Be prepared to keep your family safe and healthy from all hazards during a pandemic.

### How to prepare for a pandemic

Learn how diseases spread to help protect yourself and others. Viruses can spread from person to person, from a non-living object to a person and by people who are infected but don't have any symptoms.

Gather supplies in case you need to stay home for several days or weeks. Supplies may include cleaning supplies, non-perishable foods, prescriptions, bottled water, masks, gloves, and eye protection. Buy supplies slowly to ensure everyone can buy what they need.

Review health insurance policies to understand what is covered, including telemedicine options.

### Stay safe during a pandemic

If you believe you've been exposed to the disease, contact your doctor, follow the quarantine instructions from medical providers and monitor your symptoms. If you're experiencing a medical emergency, call 911 and shelter in place with a mask, if possible, until help arrives.

Know that it's normal to feel anxious or stressed. Engage virtually with your community through video and phone calls. Take care of your body and talk to someone if you are feeling upset.

### Stay safe after a pandemic

- Continue taking protective actions, like:
- Stay home when sick, except to get medical care
- Follow the guidance of your health care provider
- Cover coughs and sneezes with a tissue
- Practice good hygiene

## Hazmat

HAZMAT stands for hazardous materials. These materials pose a potential risk to human health, the environment, or property if not handled and transported properly. Examples include explosives, flammable substances, poisons, and radioactive materials.

### CHEMICAL

Potentially harmful chemicals can be found in our kitchen cabinets, garage, pool, and other places in our home.

- ALWAYS follow label directions
- Never mix chemicals
- Use only for approved purposes and in approved concentrations
- Store and dispose of safely, in accordance with the manufacturer's instructions
- Keep away from children
- Never store in food or drink containers
- Understand first aid directions
- Learn the Florida Poison Information Center number: 1-800-222-1222. If injuries are serious or the victim has trouble breathing, CALL 911!

### TRANSPORTATION

If a chemical transportation container used to transport hazardous materials by highway, rail, air, and sea, has a release, you will be notified through the media or local public safety agencies.

- Follow instructions quickly and carefully
- Depending on the chemical you may be told to evacuate or stay inside
- If you evacuate, move uphill and upwind to safety and keep other people from entering the area
- Do not walk or drive through a vapor cloud or spill
- Protect yourself and others by avoiding or reducing exposure to the chemical

### Biohazard material

Healthcare facilities generate and dispose of biohazard material, which may at first glance appear to be ordinary garbage. Biohazard material could expose you to disease-causing agents. As with other hazardous materials, you can usually avoid exposure by not contacting or handling the material or container. Call the authorities and explain the situation.

### Radioactive materials

It is possible that a transportation accident could involve a radioactive substance. These materials are packed in limited quantities in very strong, well-marked containers.

If you see a marked package or suspect radioactive material may be present, move away from the area and advise emergency responders. Do not attempt to move it yourself.

### Nuclear power plants

A small portion of eastern Highlands County (see map) is within the 50 mile ingestion exposure pathway zone of the Florida Power & Light St. Lucie Nuclear Power Plant, which is a twin nuclear power station on Hutchinson Island, near Port St. Lucie in St. Lucie County. An ingestion exposure pathway zone is an emergency planning zone that is concerned primarily with ingestion of food and liquid contaminated by radioactivity.

Even under worst-case conditions, an accidental release at the plant should not spread dangerous radioactivity over southwest Florida. Agricultural products from those areas would not be permitted to enter our food supply. However, we might receive evacuees from other counties. They pose no health risk.

## Cybersecurity

Cybersecurity involves preventing, detecting and responding to cyberattacks that can have wide-ranging effects on individuals, organizations, the community and the nation.

### Cyberattacks

Cyberattacks are malicious attempts to access or damage a computer or network system.

They can lead to the loss of money or the theft of personal, financial and medical information. These attacks can damage your reputation and safety.

Phishing is a common type of Cyberattack, and there are many ways phishing can happen.

**Email Phishing:** This is the most common type. Scammers send fake emails pretending to be from a trusted company (like your bank or a delivery service) to trick you into clicking a bad link or entering your personal information. Always block or ignore numbers unfamiliar to you.

**Smishing:** Like email phishing but done through text messages. You might get a fake message saying your bank account is locked or that you've won a prize, urging you to click a link that will install a backdoor into your system and capture data.

**Clone Phishing:** Scammers copy a legitimate email you've received but replace the links or attachments with malicious ones. Since it looks familiar, people are more likely to fall for it.

**Evil Twin Attack:** A fake Wi-Fi network is set up to look like a real one (like at a coffee shop). When people connect, scammers can steal their data.

**Search Engine Phishing:** Fake websites appear in search results, tricking people into entering their personal information.

The best way to stay safe from tricks online is to call the real company or person using a phone number you already know and ask if the message is real.

### SAFETY TIPS

- Remember, no legitimate organization will demand money or gift cards as payment over the phone!
- Limit the personal information you share online. Change privacy settings and do not use location features.
- Keep software applications and operating systems up-to-date.
- Use a secure Internet connection and Wi-Fi network, and change passwords regularly.
- Create strong passwords by using upper and lower case letters, numbers and special characters.
- Don't share PINs or passwords. Use devices that use biometric scans when possible (e.g. fingerprint scanner or facial recognition).
- Check your account statements and credit reports regularly.
- Remember that the government will not call, text or contact you via social media about owing money.

## Terrorism

The Federal Bureau of Investigation defines terrorism as “the unlawful use of force against persons or property to intimidate or coerce a government, the civilian population, or any segment thereof, in the furtherance of political or social objectives.”

Terrorist acts are intended to:

- Cause mass casualties and panic
- Produce a loss of critical resources
- Disrupt vital services and the economy

The most likely targets are:

- Public assembly areas
- Public and government buildings
- Mass transit
- Places of high economic impact
- Telecommunications facilities/electric grid
- Historic or symbolic places
- Amusement parks
- Special events
- Large structures and bridges

Visiting these places is part of our way of life. You should not avoid them but have a heightened sense of awareness when you visit.

How should you prepare?

Learn how to stay safe at home and prepare a supply kit if there is a chemical or biological attack (or even a hazardous spill).

Stay safe at home:

- Identify a safe room in the home with as few doors and windows possible. Bring/store your disaster supply kit in the safe room.
- Shut off the ventilation system and latch all doors and windows to reduce airflow from the outside.
- Use precut plastic sheeting to cover openings where air can enter the room, including doors, windows, vents, and electrical outlets, using duct tape to create a good seal.
- Listen to a battery-powered radio for all clear. Chemicals used in an attack will be carried on the wind and will dissipate over time.

If there is an explosion:

- Take cover if heavy debris is falling. Leave the building as quickly as possible.
- NEVER take an elevator if there is a fire or if you question the building's structural integrity.
- Use fire escapes and assist individuals with physical disabilities to evacuate.

When you travel:

- If you are traveling to a foreign country, check the U.S. Department of State web page at <http://travel.state.gov/> for any travel advisories or procedure changes. Always keep your identification papers in a secure place.
- Check with the airlines in advance for any special safety procedures in place.

- Cooperate with officials who are responsible for security inspections.

As always... See something, say something!

## **Active shooter**

### **How to respond when an active shooter is in your vicinity**

Quickly determine the most reasonable way to protect your own life. Customers and clients are likely to follow the lead of employees and managers during an active shooter situation.

#### **RUN:**

- Have an escape route and plan in mind
- Leave your belongings behind
- Keep your hands visible

#### **HIDE:**

- Hide in an area out of the active shooter's view
- Block entry to your hiding place and lock the doors

#### **FIGHT:**

- As a last resort and only when your life is in imminent danger
- Attempt to incapacitate the active shooter
- Act with physical aggression and throw items at the active shooter

#### **CALL 911 WHEN IT IS SAFE TO DO SO**

### **How to respond when law enforcement arrives on the scene**

How you should react when law enforcement arrives:

- Remain calm, and follow verbal instructions from law enforcement
- Immediately raise hands and spread fingers
- Keep hands visible
- Avoid making quick movements toward officers such as attempting to hold on to them for safety
- Avoid pointing, screaming and/or yelling
- Do not stop to ask officers for help or direction when evacuating, just proceed in the direction from which officers are entering the premises

Information you should provide to law enforcement or 911 operator:

- Location of the victims and the active shooter
- Number of shooters, if more than one
- Physical description of shooter(s)
- Number and type of weapons held by the shooter(s)
- Number of potential victims at the location

## **IMPORTANT CONTACT NUMBERS**

Emergencies 911

Citizens Information Line 863-402-6800

Public Safety (Fire Rescue, Emergency Management) 863-402-7600

Sheriff's Office 863-402-7200

Public Information Office 863-402-6833

Avon Park Fire Department 863-453-6557

Lake Placid Police Department 863-699-3757

Sebring Fire Department 863-471-5105

Sebring Police Department 863-471-5107

Florida Department of Health Highlands County 863-386-6040

Animal Services 863-655-6475

### Utilities

Avon Park Utilities 863-382-5901

Lake Placid Utilities 863-441-2075

Sebring Utilities 863-471-0166

Duke Energy 1-800-700-8744

Florida Power & Light Company 1-888-488-7703

Glades Electric 863-946-6200

Peace River Electric 1-800-282-3824

Comcast 1-800-266-2278; 863-385-2578

Century Link 1-800-261-1691

### Waste services

Highlands County 863-655-0005

Avon Park 863-452-4433

Lake Placid 863-699-3747

Sebring 863-471-5115

### Government

Highlands County Board of County Commissioners 863-402-6500

City of Avon Park 863-452-4400

City of Sebring 863-471-5100

Town of Lake Placid 863-699-3747

Sun 'n Lake of Sebring Special Improvement District 863-382-2196

Spring Lake Special Improvement District 863-655-0615

Spring Lake Special Improvement District 863-655-0615

Sun 'n Lake of Sebring Special Improvement District 863-382-2196

## **StormReady**

StormReady is a voluntary program created by the National Weather Service to help communities prepare and protect residents from hazardous weather. StormReady is a nationwide program focused on helping community leaders and emergency managers strengthen local safety programs. Currently there are 3,057 StormReady sites nationally. StormReady communities are better prepared for hazardous weather conditions through planning, education and awareness.

### **To be officially StormReady, a community must:**

- Establish a 24-hour warning point and emergency operations center.
- Have more than one method of receiving severe weather forecasts and warnings and alerting the public.
- Create a system that monitors local weather conditions.
- Promote public readiness through community seminars.
- Develop a hazardous weather plan, to include training severe weather spotters (SKYWARN) and training exercises.

**For more information, visit [weather.gov/stormready](https://www.weather.gov/stormready)**