

A Tale of Two Cities

Even if you're expecting it, the news of its arrival comes always as a shock.

Whether it's a hurricane striking the Northeast in late summer, an earthquake touching down on the West Coast, or a record *426 tornadoes* ravaging communities for four days across no fewer than seven U.S. states — Alabama, Arkansas, Georgia, Mississippi, North Carolina, Tennessee and Virginia — a natural disaster may be headed your way. And though its devastation may bypass your operations, your neighbor might not be so lucky.

Two NACS retail members affected by the second deadliest tornado disaster in U.S. history shared their story with us. One retailer escaped relatively unscathed, while the other suffered near total destruction. Although wildly divergent fates, together they tell a story of an industry that is resilient, compassionate and the focal point for communities in times of need.

The Storm: Fultondale, Alabama

For more than a week beginning on

April 19, the National Weather Service's Storm Prediction Center (SPC) had been monitoring a buildup of storm activity across huge sections of the United States, from Texas to Michigan.

On April 25, a three-mile wide tornado killed four people in Arkansas, with a second causing extensive damage to the Little Rock Air Force Base. The following day, tornado warnings and watches were called across several states, while severe storms accompanied by hail pelted parts of Pennsylvania and New York.

Retailer Rahim Budhwani followed

the storm reports closely. With seven convenience stores in the Southeast, and because of his leadership on the NACS Board of Directors, the Petroleum & Convenience Marketers of Alabama Board of Directors and the Alabama Merchants Association, he is all too familiar with natural disasters and their effect on communities and businesses.

When Budhwani awoke on April 27, the SPC had already issued severe weather warnings for the Southern United States, and by 6:00 am, the first storm had passed through Alabama, knocking out power at his Chevron station in Fultondale, a suburb of neighboring Birmingham.

"After the first storm, we just lost power, but it came back on very quickly, there was little business [interruption]," Budhwani said.

Less than 12 hours later, a second

When hugely destructive tornadoes struck in the South, convenience stores proved resilient and rose to the challenge of serving their communities.

BY JERRY SOVERINSKY

storm struck Fultondale — this one a tornado that inflicted devastating consequences. Photographs taken the following day reveal Budhwani's store canopy reduced to a pile of debris, with its steel framework twisted like pipe cleaners. (See images above.)

"The canopy and pumps are gone," Budhwani said. "One of the [store] windows was blown out, and when the storm came, it created a sort of a vortex; it destroyed everything inside the store."

A couple of days later, city inspectors officially condemned the store from reopening, though the restriction was moot. "Our roof was damaged, the air conditioning units were ruined, we had no pumps," he said quietly.

Prior to the second storm striking, Budhwani had been in close contact with his store manager, and with news

▼ The calm before the storm in Fultondale, Alabama, on April 17, 2011...



...and then the devastation on April 28, 2011 ▼



reports indicating advancing tornadoes, he initiated a checklist of disaster preparation steps.

"First, we did a safety check and determined there was a clerk and four customers inside the store," Budhwani said. "So first thing, we called the cashier and told her to get inside the cooler with the customers until the storm passes. [The cooler] is the safest place to be when a storm hits; it's made of brick and is essentially a metal closet, a box within the store."

Budhwani said, "We shut off the pumps, and normally we would have cut the power, but it had already gone out... The clerk locked the doors — in case there were looters while she was in the cooler — and she dropped the money into a safe. She didn't do a day close, we didn't care about that. It's all about the safety of our cashier. We have insurance

for the store, but we can't replace her," Budhwani said.

Finally, as the clerk headed to the cooler with the customers, she was instructed to take a first aid box, which included a flashlight and cell phone.

Twenty minutes after the tornado struck Fultondale and Budhwani's store, an eerie calm descended over the area. The clerk emerged from the cooler and phoned Budhwani to tell him that the store "was gone."

"It was difficult to reach the store, there were trees all over the road, but we eventually made our way there by 8:00 pm," he recalled. "Thankfully, the cashier was OK, she was shaken up but she and the customers were not hurt."

The Storm: Amory, Mississippi

On April 27, just before 3:00 pm, an EF5 tornado (the Fujita scale rates tornado intensity from EF0 to EF5) struck Smithville, Mississippi, a town of roughly 900 residents. With winds that exceeded 200 miles per hour, the tornado was the world's first EF5 tornado in more than three years (an EF5 tornado

is extremely rare, representing less than 0.1 percent of all tornadoes), and its effects were deadly: 27 people were killed, the town's water system was completely destroyed, and its post office, police station and hundreds of homes were either damaged or destroyed.

Tony Barham is director of store operations for the Express Shop convenience store in the neighboring town of Amory, one of 28 stores owned by parent company Litco Petroleum.

When the tornado stormed through Smithville, it spared Barham's store, though winds knocked out power and operations were suspended. "We were told power would be down for three days, so we gave away all of our ice cream and milk to residents, locked the doors and went home," Barham said.

Less than 12 hours later, Barham got a phone call from the Amory Police Department telling him power had been restored to his store. "We were the only available source for gas and necessities," Barham said, "and I told the police we'll get somebody out there as soon as we could."

The next 24 hours were a whirlwind of activity for Barham and his staff, as

they hurried to provide necessities for local residents.

"We called the manager, we called a maintenance guy, our district manager came in and picked up supplies for breakfast," Barham said, "and we were open in two hours selling fuel. By 6:00 am, we were selling breakfast and had contacted several vendors...our ice was refilled by 7:00 am, and we got fresh food, too."

The effort was truly a collective one, and Barham said it was the result of long-standing relationships with employees and suppliers.

"There are a few other [convenience stores] but we have been there for more than 25 years," Barham said. "We're one of the old school stores, [the police] know us...the owner of our company is from Mississippi and the police department had his phone number. They knew they could call and get a response."

It's a declaration stripped of any conceit, and one that richly distributes praise.

"We had our bread guy, our milk guy, all of our vendors stepped up for us," he said. "Our suppliers came to us and asked what we needed...If you need

Disaster Planning & Recovery: Make a List

A detailed disaster preparation and recovery plan minimizes the safety risk to employees and customers, as well as the interruption to operations. Among things retailers can do:

Write it down: According to CA XOsoft, a California-based firm that helps companies reduce the financial risk of data loss and business services, companies should draft a written statement with clear recovery steps. The statement should include, among other things, downtime estimates, a chain of command and how the company will meet regulatory requirements.

Develop a communication plan: A detailed list of business contacts, personnel, suppliers, government agencies and industry associations will help expedite recovery efforts.

Backup data offsite: The offsite storage of data backups,

insurance policies, bank account numbers and emergency contact numbers minimizes the loss of critical data and thus expedites the reopening of operations post-disaster.

Develop a lockdown plan: Any lockdown plan should place a priority on the safety of employees and customers.

Create a post-disaster plan: Within days of the tornado striking his store, Budhwani had already called on contractors, maintenance crews and suppliers, checklist-like preparation that will ensure an efficient rebuilding or repairing effort.





The Alabama tornado disaster left thousands of residents homeless.



anything else, you let us know,' one of them said.

"If you deliver ice and I called you at 5:00 am, you'd more than likely say you couldn't do it," Barham said. "But not this guy, he got up and took care of it. Which wasn't easy, either, since many of the roads here were flooded."

The Aftermath: Fultondale

Less than a week after Budhwani's Chevron store was struck, he was sharing his story with me, sifting through the details while simultaneously ticking off a list of items he would be discussing the next day with his insurance company.

"The insurance agent is coming in tomorrow to assess the situation; currently, our building is condemned," Budhwani said, pausing momentarily, the first hint of the emotional heft of his loss. But it's just for a moment, as he gathered himself and continued reciting a long list of tasks he had already begun addressing.

"The insurance agent is coming out, we have contacted a contractor that deals with this kind of damage, we have called a canopy company, and a signage company," he said. "So we have all of those things lined up."

And whether it's rebuilding or repairing his store, he's just anxious to resume serving the Fultondale community.

"The store has been there for a long time," he said. "Once the insurance agent [offers his assessment], we will begin moving forward."

The Aftermath: Amory

One week after tornadoes ravaged Smithville, Barham said the cleanup has not yet started. "They're still searching for missing people," he said.

As a result, people from town continue to visit his Amory store, with diesel fuel, ice and pizza in high demand. And while the disaster is still too fresh to allow any significant reflection, Barham was able to offer this assessment, which he emphasized was more an industry attribution than one focused on his store.

"We're not bragging, but the police called our store to open — not McDonald's, not Domino's. The National Guard, the police, the media, they turn to us. That says a lot for our industry," Barham acknowledged.

"I wish there was more than that out there, but in a crisis, they turn to us. Convenience stores are much more than just convenience. They're a necessity — and I think that's pretty neat." **NACS**

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Industry Resources

A number of resources can assist retailers with disaster planning, recovery and relief:

- The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency offers detailed information on disaster preparation and recovery at epa.gov/NaturalEmergencies.
- FEMA offers comprehensive information addressing disaster preparation and recovery at fema.gov.
- The NACS website links to disaster planning and recovery resources. Go to nacsonline.com and click on "Industry Resources."
- The Systems Audit Group publishes the annual Edwards Disaster Recovery Sourcebook (previously The Disaster Recovery Yellow Pages): disaster-risk-planning.com/index.html.