

Hurricane forecasters to gather this week

Calm before the storms



Photographer: JASON NUTTLE

Max Mayfield, the new director of the National Hurricane Center, stands outside his Miami office.



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Mighty Max is about to take the Treasure Coast by storm.

"Without question, (he's) what everyone is looking forward to," said Rob Shelt, acting disaster director for the Red Cross Martin County chapter.

With the start of hurricane season this week, local emergency officials have scheduled a first-of-its-kind storm preparation conference, Friday evening in the Wanda Yarboro Auditorium at Martin County High School in Stuart.

The featured speaker will be Max Mayfield, the new director of the National Hurricane Center in Miami.

Joining him will be one of the center's former directors, Bob Sheets; Dennis Decker, warning coordina-

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tion meteorologist for the National Weather Service in Melbourne; American Red Cross personnel; and officials from county building and emergency management departments serving the Treasure Coast.

The conference is to be a prelude to the Red Cross's sixth annual hurricane fair, which will take place at Treasure Coast Square mall in Jensen Beach next Saturday and Sunday.

"Though we've had a lot of success with the annual hurricane fair, we thought this year we'd do something a little different in recognition of what we believe is a huge public interest in hearing experts speak on the subject," Shelt said.

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"Though Floridians are always concerned about hurricanes, I think last year's close encounter with Floyd and surprise encounter with Irene have heightened everybody's sense of just how vulnerable we can be."

The main theme of Friday's panel discussion and the hurricane fair will be getting information out to help people prepare for the storms ahead.

Mayfield, 51, a veteran hurricane tracker and storm system forecaster, was named director of the National Hurricane Center on May 10. He had been acting director of the center since January, when his predecessor, Jerry Jarrell, retired after two years in the top position.

It's now Mayfield's job to oversee the team of hurricane forecasters, specialists and technical personnel who monitor tropical weather around the world.

"My message to residents living along the Treasure Coast is real simple, and one we've been preaching for a long, long, long time," Mayfield said. "Every individual, every family and every business needs to have a hurricane plan and have it in place before the start of the hurricane season."

At a news conference in Washington, D. James Baker, administrator of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, the hurricane center's parent agency, introduced Mayfield as "a leader with confidence among his peers, emergency managers and the media."

'Knows every link'

Retired Air Force Brig. Gen. Jack Kelly, director of the National Weather Service, added, "Max knows every link in the critical process of hurricane predictions."

He understands the science of hurricanes and the science of communicating the threat of hurricanes, which will help communities in danger of a land-falling storm take necessary safety precautions."

Steven J. Wolfberg, Martin County's director of emergency services, couldn't agree more.

All the indications we've been receiving in emergency management are that as bad as hurricanes have sometimes been to South Florida in the past, they seem to be getting stronger and therefore

excellent opportunity for people to hear what they need to do to protect themselves."

Mayfield began his forecasting career with the Air Force in 1970 after graduating from the University of Oklahoma with a degree in mathematics. In 1972, he joined the National Weather Service as a satellite meteorologist in Miami.

The Oklahoma native earned his master's degree in meteorology at Florida State University in 1987 and then became a hurricane specialist.

Since 1988, Mayfield has written half of the Atlantic and Eastern North Pacific annual hurricane summaries, published in *Monthly Weather Review* and *Weatherwise*.

In 1996, Mayfield was awarded the Francis W. Reichelderfer Award from the American Meteorological Society for exemplary performance as coordinator of hurricane preparedness presentations to emergency managers and the public.

Mayfield said his goal is to warn people in harm's way earlier and increase the hurricane center's understanding of the tracks and intensity of storms.

"One of the key things about Max is he knows how to address the concerns of the emergency management community," said Mel Baxley, Martin County's disaster response planner.

"When a storm is bearing down on your community, emergency managers need a steady stream of the most up-to-date information. Max has always been more than willing to share whatever information he has with us."

Among the things Mayfield said he will talk about Friday is exactly what a hurricane preparedness plan should be. It's not just a list of do's and don'ts, he said.

"In the case of a hurricane, having a plan means knowing what you're vulnerability is and protecting yourself accordingly," Mayfield said.

"There are all kinds of hazards associated with these storms — wind, rain, flooding, tornadoes and, in your area, probably the biggest is storm surge. I mean, if a hurricane hit the coast just right, it could send a massive surge right up the St. Lucie River and into places like downtown Stuart."

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"All the indications we've been receiving in emergency management are that as bad as hurricanes have sometimes been to South Florida in the past, they seem to be getting stronger and therefore pose even more of a threat," he said.

"Given this new reality, we are very fortunate to have people like Max — and Bob Sheets for that matter — coming to Martin County.

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winning to share whatever information he has with us."

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As deputy director, Mayfield shared Jarrell's role of appearing on television to explain the progress and development of storms, announcing hurricane warnings and recommending preparations.

He will become more familiar to the public during the 2000 Atlantic hurricane season, which will start Thursday and run through Nov. 30.

"It's probably the most visible



National Hurricane Center employees in Miami discuss the upcoming

position in the National Weather Service, because when a tropical storm or hurricane is bearing down on the country, the face you see on television is the head" of the hurricane center, Kelly said.

Lauderdale conference

The upcoming events on the Treasure Coast are not the only gatherings heralding the beginning of hurricane season.

More than 1,000 meteorologists and hurricane researchers will be in Fort Lauderdale on Monday for the start of a week-long conference on tropical storms, sponsored by American Meteorological Society.

"This is really more of a scientific conference, looking at the latest hurricane research and the science behind the storms rather than how to protect yourself from them," said Stephanie Kenitzer, a spokeswoman for the Boston-based organization founded in 1919.

Hundreds of research papers, on topics ranging from factors contributing to hurricane intensification to how subtle changes in

ocean currents influence a storm's track, will be discussed and dissected at the Fort Lauderdale Convention Center.

"The premise of a conference like this is we know a lot about hurricanes but also realize we need to know a lot more about them," Kenitzer said.

"For instance, while we understand what fuels hurricanes, the details of why they intensify the way they do and when they do — and why they sometimes intensify even after making landfall — is still something we need to study."

Kenitzer described the scientists who will attend the conference as the people who take "this big, swirling mass you see on the Weather Channel or your local news program and taking it apart to learn how its individual components play a part in the whole."

Although the main purpose of the conference is to allow scientists working in different parts of the country to exchange information, Kenitzer said the society also hopes the discussions will bear practical fruit.

"We're not going to see any-



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storm season.

thing emerge from this conference that's going to radically change how storms are dealt with this hurricane season," she said, "but it's very likely the discussion that take place here will lead to improved forecast models and an improved responses by emergency service professionals down the road."

Big crowd expected

Shelt said the Red Cross is expecting more than 40,000 people to attend this year's hurricane fair at the Treasure Coast mall.

"Given the destruction, particularly the destruction of flooding associated with Hurricane Irene, people are more aware of what these storms can do on a local level," the Red Cross official said. "The sole purpose of this fair is to give people the chance to meet with representatives from government agencies and commercial vendors and formulate their own responses to this threat."

Like Shelt, Martin County official Baxley thinks the hurricane fair

will be very well attended this year.

"People aren't panicking. They're not outwardly nervous. But they do seem to be taking hurricanes a little more seriously than they have in the past," he said. "Rather than just having a cursory interest in the start of the hurricane season, they're getting prepared in a way that suggests genuine concern."

Mayfield also is working on the eastern Pacific tropical season, which began May 15.

After coming to life as Tropical Depression 1-E, about 235 miles south of Acapulco, Mexico, Tropical Storm Aletta became the first hurricane of the year Thursday.

"Oh, we're already turning up the crank, running advisories for residents living on the Pacific coast of Mexico," Mayfield said.

For more information on the hurricane fair or Friday night's hurricane panel discussion at Martin County High School, call the Martin County Chapter of the American Red Cross at 287-2002.