

Monroe County Hurricane Preparation – Evacuation Re-Entry

Re-entry Decals available

In light of the approaching hurricane season, the Monroe County Sheriff's Office wants to remind everyone about Hurricane Re-entry issues in the event of an evacuation order in the Florida Keys.

Hurricane Re-entry decals, color coded for different areas of the Keys, are currently available at all Sheriff's Office substations and the Sheriff's Office Headquarters building on Stock Island. They are also available from all tag offices in the Keys, Key West City Hall, Islamorada City Hall and the Ocean Reef Public Safety Communications Center. The decals will be used to identify Monroe County residents at the re-entry point in Florida City after a storm has passed. The city of Key West is issuing its own decal, which will also be honored at the re-entry point in Florida City. A re-entry decal is meant to speed up the re-entry process, but is not mandatory to re-enter the Keys. If a person does not have a decal, he or she may also present a driver's license with a Keys address, or some other proof of residency or proof of home or property ownership.

"I want to make it perfectly clear that these stickers are meant to assist law enforcement with identifying county residents so the re-entry process will work more smoothly and efficiently. Having one does not mean you can re-enter the county at any time you wish after a storm," said Sheriff Rick Roth. "The appropriate time for re-entry will be determined by the Sheriff's Office, depending upon the circumstances at the time."

Some of the factors considered in the re-entry process will be whether or not emergency personnel, supplies and equipment have been brought in and set up, whether rescue crews have had enough time to assist any trapped or injured people in the hurricane affected area and, most importantly, whether it is judged to be safe for residents to re-enter a particular area.

The new hurricane re-entry stickers are orange in color for lower Keys residents (from Key West to the south end of the Seven Mile Bridge), blue for middle Keys residents (from the north end of the Seven Mile Bridge to the south end of the Long Key Bridge) and yellow for the upper Keys (from the north end of the Long Key Bridge to the county line, including Ocean Reef

In the event a storm devastates a particular area of the Keys, as happened during Georges, the color coded re-entry stickers will allow law enforcement to separate those residents who are traveling to relatively safe areas from those who are returning to the more badly damaged areas of the county. Depending on the circumstances, the people returning to relatively intact areas may be allowed to re-enter sooner than the others.

Some residents who evacuated during Georges complained that they had trouble finding out about re-entry to the county because rumor control telephone lines were busy when they called. To address that problem, additional phone lines have been diverted to rumor control. The Monroe County rumor control hot line number is 1-800-955-5504. When calling the rumor control number during or after a storm, however, residents need to be patient. The phones are staffed by volunteers who do the best they can to take calls quickly, and give out up-to-date information to the best of their ability. Anyone who wishes to volunteer to answer these phone lines during a hurricane or other emergency can call the Office of County Commissioner Mary Kay Reich at (305)852-7175.

The State Office of Emergency Management also has their Florida Emergency Information Line, which is activated in the event of an emergency and which will have up-to-date information available about Monroe County if a hurricane hits. That phone number is 1-800-342-3557.

Re-entry procedure if an evacuation order is issued

The Monroe County Sheriff's Office would like to remind people about the procedure for re-entering the county if an evacuation order is given during a Hurricane.

First and foremost, no one should attempt to re-enter the county in the aftermath of a storm until officials from Monroe County issue an announcement that it is safe to do so. Many issues must be considered before residents are allowed back into the Keys. Before allowing residents to re-enter, officials must consider the safety of the areas affected by the storm, and the safety of the highway into and out of the Florida Keys. The next priority is getting emergency crews into the Keys in order to begin clearing roadways, assisting any people who might be injured, and begin clearing downed power lines and restoring crucial services like phones, electricity and water. Trucks and other vehicles carrying food, water and ice must be allowed to enter as soon as possible as well, along with groups offering emergency assistance like the American Red Cross and the Salvation Army.

After these people and vehicles are allowed into the county, and are set up to help those returning to hurricane damaged areas, then officials can begin considering how to allow residents to return to their homes in a safe and orderly fashion. Who is allowed in, and in what order depends on where damage has occurred, what the condition of the roadway is and how safe it is for people to travel in the Keys.

The Sheriff's Office highly recommends that everyone who does evacuate stay put in the aftermath of the storm until an announcement is made that they may return. Many people who attempted to return to the county directly following Hurricane Georges in 1998 ended up stuck in a long line of traffic in Florida City, with no where to go and nothing to do for a long period of time.

Remember: no one will be allowed to re-enter the Keys until it is determined to be safe. Law Enforcement Officers will be stationed at all entry points to turn people around who try to return early.

Once an announcement is made that it is safe to return, everyone should proceed south on the Florida Turnpike to Exit One in Florida City. Once off the turnpike, at the exit point, law enforcement officers will check for Hurricane Re-entry decals and direct people to the designated staging area for their particular decal. Decals are issued depending on where a person lives in the Keys. There are separate stickers for the upper, middle and lower Keys and for the city of Key West. Those people who do not have a decal will be pulled to the side and identification and proof of residency will be checked. A decal will then be issued to those who do not have them, and they also will be directed to the appropriate staging areas. No one will be allowed to enter the Keys until they have been checked and cleared for entry.

Once a particular area of the Keys is cleared for re-entry, those people in the designated staging area for that location will be escorted into the county and allowed to return home.

It is important that people not try to re-enter the county before it is determined to be safe. Everyone trying to enter prior to that time will be stopped and turned back. Remember, there aren't many facilities available at the designated staging areas, and they will not be comfortable areas to stay in for very long. Law enforcement officers in the Florida City area will not allow anyone to park on the highway, or on the highway right-of-way for any extended period of time.

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