

# Agents Respond to Hurricane Rita

by Sgt. Richard Purvis

As we all know, Louisiana suffered a serious blow with Hurricane Katrina making landfall near New Orleans on Aug. 28. But what is seldom mentioned in the media is that less than one month later, southwest Louisiana was again struck by an even larger, more intense storm. Hurricane Rita made landfall near Lake Charles. The hurricane was so large and so strong that the effects were felt all along the Louisiana coast.

Terrebonne Parish, one of the state's lowest parishes, suffered through an estimated 9-foot tidal surge in Rita's wake. Bear in mind, Hurricane Rita passed approximately 200 miles south of Terrebonne's coast, but it still caused major damage and flooding along low-lying bayou communities.

These communities are situated along the five major bayous that pass through Terrebonne Parish. Bayous Pt. Aux Chene, Terrebonne, Grand Caillou, Petit Caillou and Bayou Dularge were all seriously affected in the same manner as New Orleans in the wake of Katrina. Whole neighborhoods were under four to six feet of water. As with Hurricane Katrina, the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries Enforcement Division was called into action to rescue those families that were stranded by the high water.

Agents from Terrebonne, Lafourche and St. John parishes marshaled on the morning of Sept. 24 when Rita struck. Region 7 and Region 8 enforcement offices sent additional agents for reinforcement. Together, we went to the hardest hit areas and began

using our shallow draft boats to rescue stranded victims along the bayou communities. Several times during the course of the day, we were forced to reposition our command post farther and farther north due to the rising floodwaters. The residents of our bayous have a "seafaring" culture. As such, they were fairly self-sufficient. The typical family owns one or more boats, which they used to evacuate themselves. Rescuers were mainly concerned with the elderly, the infirmed and the poorer families, who either didn't have access to boats or could not escape on their own.

Our agents worked through that day and night until it became too dangerous to continue rescue efforts. When the agents arrived at first light the next morning, they found the waters had begun to subside. They launched their boats and made contact with people whom they had contacted the previous day but who had opted to stay in their homes—just to make sure none of them needed assistance getting out of the area. By the end of the second day, the water level had dropped to the point that anyone who remained could evacuate on their own if they wished to do so.

Our thanks go out to all agents who responded from other areas—many of who had been victims of Hurricane Katrina the month before and had lost homes themselves. It would have been easy for them to stay wherever they were and lick their own wounds, but they instead opted to come to the aid of other Louisiana citizens in need. ■

## PHOTO GALLERY

