



## The Unconquered Seminoles: Protecting People and Property is Priority One

### Full Mitigation Best Practice Story

#### *Tribal, FEMA Region IV*

**Hollywood, FL** - In a state rocked by one powerful hurricane season after another, the leadership of the Seminole Tribe of Florida has taken numerous steps to protect its members. Curt Sommerhoff, emergency manager for the tribe, said the efforts have created a security for reservation residents that equals or exceeds measures taken by many cities or counties throughout Florida.



In September 2002, the Seminole Tribe adopted the Florida Building Code as the model for its own construction standards.

“Since Hurricane Andrew in 1992, building codes and flood mitigation in Florida have saved lives and protected property,” said Sommerhoff. “We’ve done some things to take advantage of those lessons.”

As a sovereign nation, the Seminole Tribe is not required to follow the building restrictions or standards set by the state. However, tribal leaders decided to follow Florida’s building codes because they were among the most stringent in the nation.

According to Bill McHatton, the tribe’s building official and inspector, six reservations comprise the Seminole Tribe’s territory: Big Cypress, Brighton, Hollywood, Tampa, Immokalee, and Fort Pierce. While only Miami-Dade and Broward counties require Florida’s most demanding code enforcement, the stringent building code adopted by the Seminole Tribe extends throughout its territory.

“The Florida Building Code is a minimum standard,” said McHatton. “The high-velocity-hurricane-one subsection, which is enforced in Broward and Miami-Dade counties, requires even tougher building than other areas. The Tribal Council decided that this should be enforced on all of its reservations, regardless of what each respective county actually required. The Tribal Council has gone over and above what the minimum standards are for Florida.”

The building techniques implemented by the Seminoles are considered “code plus,” or above code. They are most prominently featured in the Fort Pierce reservation community, is comprised of 35 homes, with plans for another 35. Each house has been built to withstand 140 mph winds using concrete and steel construction. Then, each home was fitted with impact-resistant windows and shutters. Finally, a 15,000-watt generator with enough power to run the entire house was installed.

“Prior to the 2004 hurricane season, many residents would go to shelters,” said Pete Russo, of the Seminole Tribe housing department. “But, a lot of the elderly tribe members want to stay in their own homes. So, the tribe decided to refocus on making them safe where they are. Any home built with the enhanced code, especially after 2002, is going to be a well-built structure and will provide a greater degree of hurricane protection.”

The Seminoles’ mitigation efforts far exceed strong building techniques and several critical services are available to tribe members at no cost. For example, the tribe has secured a number of large fuel tanks with separate containers for diesel and gasoline. The tanks are constantly maintained, keeping fuel for emergency needs accessible—even in times of shortage.

Working closely with the South Florida Water Management District, the Seminoles keep a close eye on Lake Okeechobee and other nearby bodies of water for signs of possible flooding.

“We handle flood mitigation through an extensive maintenance program,” said Sommerhoff. “Our Water Resources Management Department makes sure that all the canals and waterways are kept clear of debris, and we’re constantly monitoring water levels and regulating holding areas. As far as construction, every new building is elevated above the Base Flood Elevation.”

The tribe has its own aviation department consisting of several planes and helicopters. The aircraft are used not only to facilitate disaster response throughout the six reservations and to help those Seminoles who live off the reservations in Florida,

but also to assist neighboring communities. The Seminoles are actively involved in assisting Native American tribes in other parts of the country, and will send their aircraft to support and deliver supplies and equipment in times of need.

The Seminole Tribe has its own television station and satellite TV reception is provided to all tribal members. Prior to a hurricane or other disaster, the station broadcasts advisories and updates. The broadcasting department has produced a hurricane-preparedness TV program that will air regularly during hurricane season.

Currently, the tribe is working toward completing a number of programs that will help maintain its high level of preparedness. By 2007, the tribe will be compliant with the National Incident Management System, which is a uniform structure that allows all responders to follow the same procedures and ultimately improves communication and overall effectiveness in disaster response. In addition, the Seminoles are establishing Community Emergency Response Teams for each of their reservations, and plan to participate in the National Weather Service's StormReady program by the end of 2006.

To continue their dedication to effective disaster response, preparedness, and damage reduction, the Seminoles are developing an enhanced Hazard Mitigation Plan. Once the plan is complete, they intend to become the third Native American tribe to gain Direct Grantee status with the federal government. Direct Grantee status would allow the tribe to manage any disaster assistance it receives from the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), rather than coordinating funds through the state.

According to Sommerhoff, the Seminole Tribe leaders are constantly thinking ahead. He said their focus on emergency management and disaster preparedness demonstrates a passionate concern for the well-being of their fellow tribe members.

"A disaster can paralyze a community," he said. "Taking steps to lessen the impact of a natural disaster should be the responsibility of every level of government. It should come as no surprise that a tribal government has gone to these lengths, particularly when that tribe is the unconquered Seminoles."

#### Activity/Project Location

Geographical Area: **Tribal**

FEMA Region: **Region IV**

#### Key Activity/Project Information

Sector: **Private**

Hazard Type: **Hurricane/Tropical Storm**

Activity/Project Type: **Building Codes**

Activity/Project Start Date: **09/2002**

Activity/Project End Date: **Ongoing**

Funding Source: **Private funds**

Funding Recipient: **Tribal Organizations/Government**

Funding Recipient Name: **Self-funded**

#### Activity/Project Economic Analysis

Cost: **Amount Not Available**

Non FEMA Cost:

## Activity/Project Disaster Information

Mitigation Resulted From Federal Disaster? **Unknown**

Value Tested By Disaster? **Yes**

Tested By Federal Disaster #: **No Federal Disaster specified**

Year First Tested: **2004**

Repetitive Loss Property? **Unknown**

## Reference URLs

Reference URL 1: <http://www.fema.gov/plan/prevent/bestpractices>

Reference URL 2: <http://www.seminoletribe.com>

## Main Points

- In a state rocked by one powerful hurricane season after another, the leadership of the Seminole Tribe of Florida has taken numerous steps to protect its members
- As a sovereign nation, the Seminole Tribe is not required to follow the building restrictions or standards set by the state. However, tribal leaders decided to follow Florida's building codes because they were among the most stringent in the nation.
- The building techniques implemented by the Seminoles are considered "code plus," or above code.
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Aerial View of Community



Rolling Shutters Protect Windows