

Florida grows at near-record pace

GAINESVILLE, Fla. -- Nov. 1, 2005 -- Despite threats from people in storm-ravaged areas to move away, new University of Florida (UF) research shows that the devastating 2004 hurricane season had little or no effect on Florida's 2004-2005 population growth.

"Florida's population grew by more than 400,000 last year," says Stanley Smith, director of UF's Bureau of Economic and Business Research. "This is one of the largest increases in Florida's history."

The Bureau bases its population estimates on building permit and electric customer data, combined with data from the 2000 Census. This year it supplemented its data by conducting 11,560 telephone interviews with residents in the 13 counties most heavily affected by the hurricanes.

"If the 2004 hurricanes had any significant effects on Florida's population growth, it would be in the area covered by these 13 counties," says Chris McCarty, director of the Bureau's survey program.

The hurricanes damaged 32 percent of the housing units for the state as a whole but 74 percent of the units in the 13-county area. Many residents were forced from their homes by structural damage and the loss of utilities.

"About 21 percent of the residents of these counties were forced to move out of their homes, at least temporarily," Smith says. "Most were away for only a few days or weeks, but others were away for several months and some still have not returned."

By the time the surveys were conducted in March through June 2005, 82 percent of those having to leave had returned.

Although the hurricanes had little effect on overall population growth for the state, they had a significant impact in several counties. The 2005 population estimates show one-year declines of 3,603 for Escambia; 2,955 for Charlotte; 1,499 for DeSoto; 454 for Hardee; and 239 for Okeechobee.

"The surveys found these counties to have experienced heavy hurricane damage," Smith says. "Since they had been growing in previous years and the state as a whole grew rapidly last year, these declines were clearly caused by the hurricanes."

Smith and McCarty do not believe the 2004 hurricanes will have a long-term impact on population growth in Florida. "Despite anecdotes of people tiring of hurricanes and wanting to leave, our prediction is that last year's hurricanes won't have any effect on long-term growth," Smith says. "Most people just accept hurricanes as part of the price of living in Florida, along with heat, humidity, mosquitoes and alligators. Some people will certainly move away, but they will be replaced by others moving in."

Hurricanes have had little effect on the rapid pace of U.S. coastal development during the past 50 years, Smith says. A previous Bureau survey showed that while population growth in Miami-Dade County slowed the first year after Hurricane Andrew, it later rebounded to even higher levels. "It may take several years for the

most heavily damaged areas to recover, but we believe they will continue to grow," Smith says.

However, hurricane hits for multiple years could take a toll on population growth, Smith says. "An occasional bad hurricane year won't override all Florida's advantages," he said. "If we had a number of bad years in a row, however, it could start to have an impact."

Smith and McCarty believe the effects of Hurricane Katrina will be quite different than the effects of hurricanes in Florida.

"Katrina was much more destructive, destroying more homes and forcing more people to move away than last year's hurricanes in Florida," Smith says. "Many people lost their jobs as well as their homes and moved hundreds or even thousands of miles away."

New Orleans is a special case, given its unique physical characteristics and the nature of its damages, McCarty says. "We expect most of the Gulf Coast to follow the Florida model, with substantial short-term population declines but long-term population growth," he adds. "But New Orleans will recover much more slowly and may never again reach its pre-hurricane population size."