



HURRICANES, REINFORCEMENTS & RESILIENCE

Cattle producers in Southeast struggle to rebuild after Hurricane Michael.

Story & photos by Becky Mills, field editor

We had no idea it was going to be like this,” says Marianna, Fla., cattleman John Hill. “When a hurricane hits Panama City as a Category 3, it’s a tropical storm by the time it gets here. This time, it was still a Category 4 when it got here.”

The behemoth that landed on Florida’s panhandle Oct. 10, 2018, reportedly killed 18 people and caused an estimated \$1.3 billion in agricultural damage alone. All Hill knows for sure is it was four hours of terror while it hovered over his place.

When he could finally get out of the house the next morning, the

47-year-old says, “I told my banker everything I had worked for the last 35 years was gone.”

He got a call that his bred heifers were on the highway.

“We had to chainsaw our way out of the house, and it took us half a day to get out with a bulldozer,” he shares, adding there really wasn’t much danger of the

heifers getting hit by a vehicle.

“There were power poles in the middle of the highway.”

After he got his heifers off the road, his next priority was getting his cattle to water. His 350-cow registered and commercial operation is watered by six wells, which won’t work without power. Even before he could hook

borrowed generators to the wells, he had to be able to get the cattle to water troughs.

“They couldn’t even walk through the woods,” he says. “Two days after the storm an excavator knocked a hole in the woods so they could get through.”

To get as many cattle as possible to functioning wells, he had to mix open heifers, bred heifers and cows. His 600-pound (lb.) steers were still together in a pasture with a month-old fence that now had trees down on almost every foot.



Above: Cattle producers struggle to rebuild after Hurricane Michael.

The best he could tell, he lost one steer and two cows when they were crushed by trees.

“It was a miracle I didn’t lose more,” he shares.

His corrals, 15 miles of fence, equipment barns and cow barns were damaged or destroyed. The computer system on his John Deere 7830 was damaged by the water that drove through the supposedly water-impermeable cover. Another had a busted cab, and nine acres of timber were leveled.

Georgia experience

In Bainbridge, Ga., Stuart Griffin

Resilient people reach out

You’re a cattle person. How many times have you sat in a short course and heard that stress raises the cortisol level of cattle? Guess what. It happens to you, too.

“A little stress is a good thing,” says Kimberly Allen, North Carolina State University extension specialist. “It gives us the energy to get out and start cleaning up.”

However, stress overload, like the stress people experience during a natural disaster, is overwhelming, she says. “When it goes to the next level and is day in and day out, even our bodies can become sick.”

John Hill found out firsthand when Hurricane Michael devastated his Marianna, Fla., cattle operation.

“The first three days I had indigestion so bad I was doubled over,” he says.

That’s when it is time to reach out, Allen says. “Get support from your community. Talk to a friend and work through it. Talk to a therapist. Resilient people get help.”

In Hill’s case, he says, “It got better and better. People started showing up. One guy asked me what he could do. I said, ‘I just needed a friend.’ ”



Marianna, Fla., cattleman John Hill felt like everything he had worked his whole life for had been destroyed after Hurricane Michael roared through.

tells a similar story.

“It was three days before we could go a half mile down the road, and that was on a four-wheeler,” he recalls. He estimates 40 miles of fence on the 6,000-acre row-crop and commercial cattle operation are damaged or destroyed. Thirty or 35 cows and calves were killed; he’s still taking stock.

Like Hill, he struggled to make sure the 1,250 mama cows and calves, who are now mixed with bulls because of the downed fences, could get to water.

One of Griffin’s other most pressing needs was feeding his yearlings. Thankfully, he sold three loads before the storm, but he had six more to go. He feeds out of Harvestore silos, but the systems are run by electricity.

“We didn’t have a generator big enough,” he says. Without power for two weeks, he ended up turning the yearlings back in with the cows, too.

Eleven center pivots were turned over and mangled. Normally, he and his partners



Above: Hurricane Michael damaged buildings, corrals and fences on John Hill’s operation.

Below: John Hill and his uncle, Paul Hill, look over John’s cows after Hurricane Michael hit.



Continued on page 184

plant all of their row-crop land in oats for the winter, both as a cover crop and for grazing. In a normal year, they have 2,000 acres of grazing by Thanksgiving. By Thanksgiving this year, they had 200 acres.

Griffin had planted 350 acres of corn silage behind field corn and it survived, but the yield has easily been halved, he says. That was supposed to be next year's feed.

"It's overwhelming," says the 65-year-old cattleman. "There is so

much you can't do, and what you can do, you're so far behind you don't know where to start."

Helping hands

Back in Georgia, even with many roads impassable, Hill didn't have to wait long for help. Roland and John Starnes, Tennessee River Music, came with generators and a skid-steer loader. At the farm in Fort Payne, Ala., Randa Starnes, John's wife, filled cattle trailers with donated food and supplies. When the cattle trailers came down, they unloaded the supplies for Hill and others in the area, then loaded Hill's open heifers and herd bulls for a trip back to Tennessee River to stay there until Hill could get his fences back up.

ZWT Ranch in Crossville, Tenn., sent cowboys and semis to help sort cattle and bring the bred heifers to their operation, where

they'll wait for new fences.

"We had to ride on the sides of the semis to lift up the power lines to get them in here," says Hill.

Thirty young men from the Mormon Church spent two weekends cleaning up trees around his catch pen and an old family house. Two men from a Farm Bureau office in South Florida came for three days.

Hill reports: "They built a half a mile of fence. They knew how to do it, too."

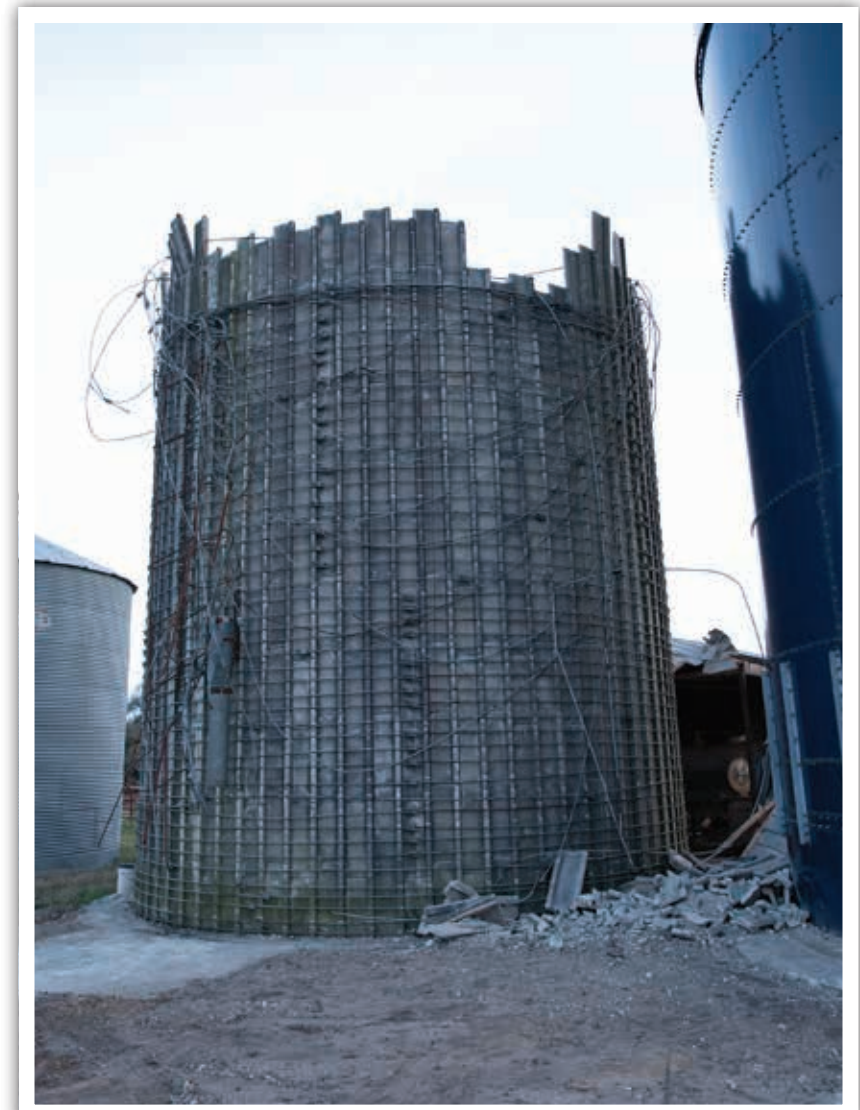
Members of the Florida Cattleman's Association cleaned up trees around Hill's house. Auctioneer Mike Jones and his son, Will, also spent two days on the fence crew.

Jonathan Gladney, Auburn University regional extension agent, built fence for eight days next to John's uncle, Paul Hill. The elder Hill, formerly of Champion



Above: The trees piled up in the front of Stuart and Becky Griffin's Bainbridge, Ga., home are a common sight in southwest Georgia after Hurricane Michael came through.

Below: Bainbridge, Ga., cattleman Stuart Griffin says his seedstock supplier went above and beyond to help him after Hurricane Michael wrecked his operation.



Hurricane Michael blew down a concrete silo built in the 1960s.

Hill, has been a fixture at his nephew's operation since the hurricane, but says about others, "There are a lot of good people in the world."

By the week of Thanksgiving, John and his nephew, 15-year-old Ben Helmes, and the part-time volunteer workforce had already replaced 7.5 miles of fence.

Stuart Griffin didn't have to wait for help, either. A gentleman he met at Sunbelt Expo several years ago brought two loads of hay from Mississippi, he shares.

"He told me people from Georgia helped him awhile back when they had a bad storm, and he wanted to pay it back," Griffin says.

Pharmaceutical company representatives showed up with water, fuel, generators, fencing and vouchers. One of Griffin's main seedstock suppliers sent him a credit toward a bull purchase.

"He went above and beyond," he says.

Veterinarian Clay Reynolds, a sales representative for Boehringer Ingelheim, came with chainsaws in hand after spending days helping in the Florida panhandle.

Griffin says, "I took him to a fenceline covered in trees and said, 'You can go north or south.' He asked me if there was a fenceline. I teared up and he teared up and said, 'You need a hug.'"

Reynolds downplays his contribution.

"For every person we helped, there are so many more who need help," he notes. "I probably didn't clear a mile of fence. These people need track hoes and bulldozers. It will take years, if not decades, to recover."

He says, though, "I admire farmers. They're tough and resilient. They'll get there, one step at a time."

Griffin, still overwhelmed, just shakes his head: "We need time. We just need time." ■

Editor's note: Becky Mills is a cattlegirl and freelance writer from Cuthbert, Ga.

Whipped by water

Hurricane Michael was by no means the only major blow to the Southeast this past fall. Hurricane Florence, which dumped most of her wrath on North Carolina, killed 32 people and left thousands homeless.

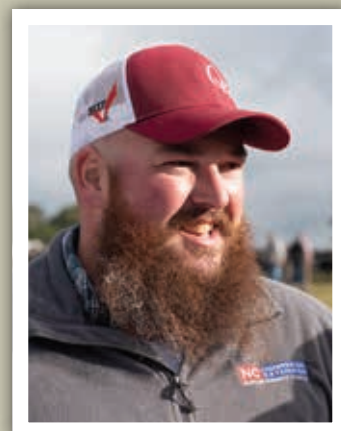
The storm caused an estimated \$1.1 billion of damage to the ag industry alone. Corn, soybeans, peanuts, cotton, tobacco and produce were pounded. There were an estimated 5,500 head of hogs and 4.1 million chickens and turkeys killed.

Cattle didn't escape, either. Adam Ross, livestock extension agent for Duplin County, N.C., says, "I personally know of 200 head of cattle that were killed."

Calypso, N.C., Angus breeder Ralph Britt says,

"The difference in Hurricane Florence and Hurricane Michael is they had wind and we had 30 inches of rain in four days."

They were blessed, though, he says. "For us, the biggest damage was our roads were washed out, and it washed out all our winter grazing."



North Carolina Extension Agent Adam Ross says cattle producers need to have a plan of response before they are hit with a natural disaster.

Ralph's son, James, says, "We had neighbors 20 miles down the road that lost 20 to 30 head of cattle. The flooding was catastrophic."

Although the Britts were out of power for five days, they were still able to feed and water their hog



Life goes on after the hurricane. David Gazda gives advice to James Britt.



Pictured from left, Ralph and James Britt and Adam Ross are still working to recover from Hurricane Florence, which hit the Carolinas hard in September 2018.

nurseries by using generators. Fortunately, they had sold all their chickens three days before the storm.

Not quite as fortunate with their cattle, their

fall-calving herd dropped 14 calves during the torrential rain. "We had a lot of sick calves, and we lost three," says James.

He says they were able to replant their 200 acres of winter grazing, and they'll work on the erosion in their crop fields this winter.

Ross, their county agent, says Hurricane Florence taught them all a lesson in planning.

"You're a whole lot more prepared for a disaster after than you were before," he says, offering some advice to other producers in disaster-prone areas.

"Make sure you have a plan."

His No. 1 item for the plan is "Where can you get hay?" In their area, more than 1,000 bales have already been donated and shipped to producers. Ross says at least another 1,000 are needed, but hopefully are on the way. Producers are also turning to gin trash, a byproduct of the cotton industry, for a hay substitute.

Once again, Ross stresses, "Get with an extension agent, or whoever advises you, and work out a plan, then be prepared to change it on the fly."



Calypso, N.C., cattlegirl Ralph Britt says they were blessed compared to many of the cattle producers hit by Hurricane Florence.