

# In the Eye of Ike

by Katrina Huffstutler

It's been almost six years since Hurricane Ike made landfall in Texas, but for those who experienced it firsthand, the memories are crystal clear. The third-costliest hurricane to ever hit the U.S. (behind only Andrew and Katrina), this strong Category 2 storm had a diameter spanning 450 miles and winds reaching 190 mph. On a scale of 1 to 6, 6 representing the most destructive, Ike came in at 5.2. By comparison, Hurricane Katrina was a 5.1.

Directly in the storm's path was sixth-generation rancher Bill

White. The cattleman, who has a commercial cow-calf operation in Jefferson and Chambers counties and raises replacement heifers in Robertson County, ranches from the Gulf of Mexico north at low elevations. So low, in fact, the highest point he ranches on is only 8 feet above sea level. Needless to say, anytime there is a disturbance in the Gulf, White is paying close attention.

"If it's something that develops into a hurricane — or has any potential of possibly causing us problems — we gather cattle up and get them

where we can get our hands on them in case we have to move them," White says.

Prior to Ike, while he'd gathered cattle in preparation many times, he'd only needed to move them twice: during Hurricane Rita in 2005 and Hurricane Carla in 1961. The area has seen a lot of smaller Category 1 storms, where a four- or five-foot storm surge will "cover up a lot of country," White says, but nothing like the devastation Ike caused.

"We did everything we could do and still had about 4,500 head of cattle in the storm



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This house was lifted from its foundation by Hurricane Ike. Who knows how far it would have been moved if it hadn't been stopped by this pipe fence.

surge,” White says. “But, luckily, I’d moved them as far north as I had a place to go with them prior to the storm.”

Those cattle were in the storm surge for about a mile and a half to three miles, but it wasn’t nearly as bad as it could’ve been if they’d been four or five miles south.

“We would have lost 90% of them if they’d stayed with me,” White says.

Instead, he lost about 5% of his cattle. With that came the loss of 100% of his fences. The storms even took a century-old frame house on the property that the ranch rented out to visiting hunters.

“It basically just cleaned the landscape off,” he says.

But property destruction wasn’t all he left behind. Monty Dozier, regional program director for Texas AgriLife Extension Service, says the hurricane really taught him and the people in the hurricane’s wake how powerful a storm surge can be.

“There was the damage to property which you’d expect from a hurricane, but also the storm surge took so much debris inland and left it on people’s pastures. Then, all that saltwater impacted the forage and then also the freshwater supply,” he says.

“People think about the flooding and maybe losing some buildings and that kind of thing, but the loss of fresh water and pastures was a major eye-opener for a lot of folks.”

Saltwater causes severe dehydration in livestock, often adding insult to debris-caused injury.

Another secondary issue? Misplaced cattle. With so many miles of fenceline destroyed, more



Moving cattle out of the affected area under their own hoofpower.



Transport trucks lined the roads near Anahuac, Winnie and Stowell to move cattle to market or to other pastures.

than 10,000 head of cattle were suddenly astray.

“Everybody’s cattle were all mixed together so we had to go in there and try to sort the cattle by ownership and that sort of thing,” White says, adding that the process took about three weeks to complete.

### Being prepared

Both White and Dozier agree the key to staying afloat when cattle country becomes hurricane country is being prepared.

“We’re pretty practiced at gathering our cattle and getting ‘em out,” White says. “We do it on a pretty regular basis.”

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The local sheriff and TSCRA law enforcement (Larry Gray, right) made sure records were kept on the animals being transported from the affected area.

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—Monty Dozier

Dozier says since most people can't have a hurricane-proof facility, it's important to have open areas where livestock can be relocated away from barns that could blow over on them, causing injury or death.

"In the Coastal Plains it's difficult to find high ground, but if there is some high ground as part of your operation, move them



All the fresh water sources for cattle had been contaminated by the saltwater pushed inland by Hurricane Ike. Ranchers used anything they had, such as small boats, as water troughs. Ranchers dumped round bales on the roads next to the water troughs and made regular rounds of the passable roads, keeping hay and water available for any cattle that might wander up out of the debris fields.

there," Dozier says. "Then pick up any loose material around that place that could become harmful during a storm."

Identification is also key.

"Branding," White says, "is just common sense."

"There were some cattle that weren't branded and had no identification. If they end up on somebody else's place and you don't have any identifying marks on them, it's going to be hard to determine that those are your cows."

Luckily, most cattle were identified.

"It was a real game changer for us during Ike when we were rounding up the cattle," Dozier says. "Most everybody had some kind of identification mark that we

could use to get those cattle back to the rightful owners."

Of course just putting a brand on them isn't enough — ranchers have got to have the brand registered with their counties.

It's estimated ranchers rounded up about 13,000 head. Of those, more than 90% were reunited with their owners. Even more impressive — some of those animals were found 25 miles from their original pastures.

The remaining cattle were handled as typical strays, becoming property of the county sheriff's department.

Another tip Dozier offers is to have agreements in place for pastures to move to or unaffected hay to purchase.



Bill White (on the microphone) talks to the local ranchers the Wednesday after Ike hit.



Notice the bottom of a pipe sticking up in the left background. The hurricane devastated almost all the working facilities and fences. Ranchers made do with what they had to gather, sort and transport cattle.



Whites Park at Anahuac was the staging area for emergency management workers. It was also a drop-off point for supplies such as water troughs, panels and hay. No supplies stayed in the area for long. They were quickly transported out to affected areas to sustain livestock.

“We had several producers move their cattle out to East Texas or down to South Central Texas,” he says. “It’d be helpful to have an agreement already set up to do that before the next storm hits.”

Of course with high fuel costs and the distance some cattle had to travel due to demand for usable pasture, relocating cattle was too costly a solution for some, who dispersed their herds with the intention of rebuilding the following year when pastures recovered.

And making the decision to disperse was not surprising — White told the *Dallas Morning News* in 2008 that his one-way fuel bill to move cattle topped \$100,000. Then there was the cost involved in paying someone else three times what it’d cost to feed them at home. But for him there was no question. He wasn’t going to sell his cattle for much less than they were worth, and

he wasn’t going to sacrifice the years of work he had invested in creating the herd he had. So he did what he had to do and spent what he had to spend.

Today, the ranching way of life lives on in the Texas Gulf Coast, and, in some ways, is stronger than ever. New structures, new fences, improved genetics — and maybe, most importantly, a plan developed between Texas AgriLife Extension Service and its state and federal partners that will make recovery easier the next time around.

And, maybe, if they can catch a break, it’ll be a long time before the plan ever has to be put into place. **HW**

## A devastating storm

- An estimated \$27 billion in U.S. damages occurred, including \$15 billion in insured losses.
- Ike’s overall damaging effect on Texas agriculture is estimated to be \$433 million in losses.
- 34 Texas counties were declared federal disaster areas.
- The storm surge extended 15-18 miles inland over Chambers County.

For more information, visit [texashelp.tamu.edu](http://texashelp.tamu.edu)