

CIVIL PROTECTION HEROS

Serigo Albañoz has twenty-two years protecting and serving. Most of his experience has been with the Fire Department in La Paz but last year he moved to Los Cabos taking on the management position for Strategic Planning and Training with the Department of Civil Protection.

The Civil Protection Department is accustomed to multi-tasking. They do accident prevention training with schools and businesses. You can see their trucks coming to the aid of a car accident scene. They attend fires large and small ready to coordinate moving people out of danger. They anticipate and create plans ready to activate in case of any type of emergency.

They are also in charge of preparing a contingency plan to avoid a disaster, should a hurricane come ashore. Starting June 1 and continuing into the coming weeks, the Civil Protection Department will deliver ten thousand brochures throughout the Municipality. These brochures cover information detailing this seasons hurricane forecasts, preparation steps to take, where the shelters are located, and a list of emergency numbers. They will focus their distribution efforts on the high risk zones, number one being the thousands of people who have set up camp in the arroyos.

Officially hurricane season for the Eastern Pacific kicked-off May 15th and the official projections from all of the “experts” is that we can expect a normal to below normal hurricane season. The National Meteorological Service (SMN) for Mexico works closely with the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) for the United States and according to Albañoz the predications made by these two agencies have a 90 to 95 percent accuracy rate.

Quoting from the NOAA announcement, this is what we can expect for the upcoming season, “Allowing for forecast uncertainties, seasonal hurricane forecasters estimate a 70 percent chance of 13 to 18 named storms, which includes 6 to 10 hurricanes, of which 2 to 5 will become major hurricanes (Category 3,4 or 5 on the Saffir-Simpson Scale)”

Historically, not too many of the named storms get close to us until late August or early September and most veer out to sea. Last year sixteen storms formed, seven became hurricanes, the typical amount is nine and only two grew into major category status and typically this number is five.

The Civil Protection Department works with a five color alert system, blue being the least dangerous within 72 hours, then going to green which is still low in danger but if the storm progresses to yellow even though it’s still moderate in danger they start preparation to move people out of high risk areas. If the storm continues to orange, meaning we’re likely to get hit within twelve hours, safety measures are stepped up and if the maximum danger color of red arrives, everything and everyone should already be secured.

Albañoz estimates a conservative number of 5,000 people living in high risk areas and additional numbers living in homes that cannot withstand the rains and winds. With only ten full-time employees and fifty volunteers covering the broad area from Buena Vista to Cabo San Lucas, the 5,000 or so people who have knowingly put down roots in dry river beds create a massive amount of work and expense for those who serve and protect.

The Civil Protection Department has to organize buses to move people to shelters, usually schools and government buildings, have on hand a supply of blankets, food and water and they also compile a list of medical doctors who will be available to volunteer their time. When asked what action is taken if someone refuses to move as sometimes happens in a quest to guard over their belongings, Albañoz responds that in this case the Police are called in to assist. The people have no option to stay, they have to relocate.

The last time San Lucas and San Jose took a direct hit and suffered substantial damage was Hurricane Marty on September 22, 2003. Hurricane names get recycled every six years and she's back on the list for this year. What's the chance of history repeating itself? No forecaster can answer that question. All we can do is help the Civil Protection Department and be prepared.