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HURRICANE AFTERMATH

Toppled trees offer glimpses into past

Scientists hope to study rings of Rita-felled timber

Associated Press

BEAUMONT - Scientists from around the country are hoping many of the estimated 2 million trees in southeast Texas toppled by Hurricane Rita can be a golden opportunity for tree-ring research.

Jim Speer, assistant professor of geography and geology at Indiana State University, and six students plan a visit to the area starting this weekend to get samples from a few hundred trees.

"Those trees are recording everything that affects them. They record temperature, rainfall, fires, insect outbreaks, and they're putting that down as a record in the stem of the tree," Speer said.

Researchers can use cross sections of tree rings and compare it with the region's climate history from the past 100 years or so to figure out how the tree recorded such events as fires and hurricanes.

Scientists can also use the rings to learn about climate and disturbances that happened

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before the written record.

"This will hopefully preserve this history, even though the trees didn't survive," Speer said.

Visiting scientists will use chain saws, hand saws, borers and sanders to get samples from the trees, which were knocked down when Rita swept across Texas and Louisiana in September.

The work involves cutting inch-thick cross-sections from the bases of oaks, pines and other species.

Collecting the samples will take about a week, Speer said, while laboratory analysis will probably take two years.

Speer said he hopes to leave behind a display with sections from some of the oldest trees in Beaumont. That might include an oak tree that lived for more than 270 years before Rita.

Jim Jordan, chair of the department of earth and space sciences at Lamar University in Beaumont, said researchers at other universities, including Michigan State and the University of Tennessee, have expressed interest in coming to do tree-ring research, a field known as dendrochronology. But they have been hampered by lack of funding.

Jordan said he has found storage space on the Lamar campus for tree research projects and is trying to meet researchers' requests for help as best he can.



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