

## Introduction

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**Kirsten:** You're listening to the NCDPS Safety Scoop, a podcast that dives into the stories of the people, programs and resources within the North Carolina Department of Public Safety. Each episode will give you the scoop from department personnel on how NCDPS enhances the safety of the people of North Carolina.

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[Pause]

## Season 2 Episode 12

**Kirsten:** Here's a scenario: a tropical system has formed in the Atlantic Ocean and is projected to impact North Carolina in several days. You live on the eastern side of the state. What do you do? Several Safety Scoop podcasts have been dedicated to sharing information about hurricane and severe weather preparedness, and this episode is no different. Today, we are going to discuss the Know Your Zone initiative, and you may recognize the voices of our guests. I'm pleased to welcome back Katie Webster and Diana Thomas to the podcast, as they share the background and purpose of the Know Your Zone initiative and dive into particulars of what individuals should know specifically about evacuations.

Know Your Zone is a cooperative effort of the North Carolina Emergency Management and County Emergency Management partners in coastal counties. If it becomes necessary during a hurricane, tropical storm or other hazard, local officials can order evacuations using these predetermined zones. These evacuation zones highlight areas most at risk to storm surge and flooding. Before the effort was launched 3 years ago, some of the language used in previous evacuation orders were based on local geography which could be confusing to residents and visitors. Having predetermined zones simplifies the evacuation process in these 21 counties, allowing local and state officials to focus efforts on emergency response.

If there are no predetermined evacuation zones in your area, it is not expected that you would be evacuated due to hazardous storm conditions. However, this does not mean that you will never receive instructions from your local officials for major emergencies. From the mountains to the coast, you should still know how to protect your family from potential risks and listen closely to emergency communications during any severe weather event or emergency. Looking for preparedness resources? Check the episode notes for helpful links. Now, let's hear from the experts.

So, thank you for joining me on the Safety Scoop to focus on Know Your Zone, but first, I'd just like to open the floor up to you. Introduce yourself to our

listeners and just give them kind of an example of what you do at Emergency Management. Diana, we can start with you.

**Diana Thomas:** Sure. I'm Diana Thomas. I am a meteorologist and a planner with North Carolina Emergency Management. I have been with the agency since 2017, and on a day-to-day basis, we generally have to keep aware of any hazardous weather that is across the state. We don't just have a specific region, county or city. We just have to keep an eye on the entire state, and we keep leadership informed of any impending hazardous weather and provide spot forecasts as needed in case.

**Katie Webster:** My name is Katie Webster, and I'm the assistant director for planning with North Carolina Emergency Management. As the assistant director for planning, I oversee our natural hazard section along with our radiological emergency preparedness section, along with our state training and exercise section. The other thing that is nested within plans is our emergency operations planning, so that includes the state emergency operations plan and the state coup plan.

**Kirsten:** Can you give me the background of what Know Your Zone is and how it got started, Katie?

**Katie:** Sure. So, Know Your Zone was launched in 2020, formally, December of 2020. And that was after several years of work to identify and develop evacuation zones across the 20 coastal counties of the state. Prior to that, North Carolina was one of the only states that did not have hurricane evacuation zones, and so that was a gap that we noticed, and we worked with our county emergency manager partners to basically document the way that they intend to or had historically evacuated. Many of those zones were not necessarily new, but more so the institution of processes that they already had in place. And so the zones were developed, and we became the megaphone for the county evacuation zones, and Know Your Zone was launched the summer of 2020.

**Kirsten:** So, Diana, this question is for you. What counties are part of Know Your Zone?

**Diana:** Yeah. So, we started with coastal evacuation zones, and we started off in 2020 with 20 counties. Again, they are the coastal region, so all of the, um, the areas along the ocean and the sound. We did just this past summer start the process of adding Duplin County to our evacuation zones, and they're our first inland county to be added. We're working on our product, our social media and all of our toolkit items, we're updating those, and our eastern region map as a whole. We're working on updating that and updating our website. Get some posters out to Duplin County, so they can advertise that. But so, now we have 21 counties that will be added into our North Carolina evacuations on initiative.

**Kirsten:** And just for my curiosity, why was Duplin County identified as a county that needed to be brought into the Know Your Zone initiative?

**Diana:** Yes, so, our coastal evacuation zones primarily were centered around storm surge and why you would need to evacuate an area for the incoming water from

the oceans or sounds. So, Duplin County saw that during evacuation along the coast, that they were getting a large amount of people that were coming to their county and then bunking there, like getting hotel rooms there. They wouldn't have shelters open there. But then they would have to evacuate with any kind of surge that comes in on the river. So, not necessarily inland flooding due to rainfall, which does happen, and you would need to evacuate at times with that, but oftentimes we still see that surge in addition to the rainfall cause some evacuations around that area. So, Duplin County wanted to be added because they did look at their flood plain mapping and looked at those vulnerable areas around the rivers and streams, and also to get the message evacuating from the coast that they do need to keep going farther west and to not—not really stop in Duplin. They aren't in the safety zone yet. They need to keep going.

**Kirsten:** Thank you for that. Katie, how can someone determine what zone they're in or if they're in one at all?

**Katie:** We have developed the Know Your Zone website, and that is [knowyourzone.nc.gov](http://knowyourzone.nc.gov) which has a lookup tool that a user can go on and put their address in, and that will drop a pin to that area on the map. And by clicking that pin, you can determine whether or not you're in the evacuation zone, and if you are, some additional information regarding that zone, specifically, what county you're in and where you could go to get more information. And so, that's the key way to determine if you are in a zone is to visit [knowyourzone.nc.gov](http://knowyourzone.nc.gov), use the lookup tool and include your address.

Those zones, which vary in color and are lettered by ABCDE, vary by county, and so some counties may only have two zones whereas some counties may have more than two zones. And that is based off of the local officials working together and looking at their vulnerability to storm surge, flooding, population and any historical knowledge they used to develop those zones. So, it is a polygon of vulnerability, and so it is able to indicate whether or not that area may need to leave in—in a certain type of event. And so, determining your zone is easy to do whether by the lookup tool or even just by a map, but sometimes it's easier to use that lookup tool because the zones can get pretty granular in some areas. And then, knowing what county you're in and being able to be ready to go back to that local site in an event which is going to give you the best information in any evacuation decision information.

**Kirsten:** Diana, how does Know Your Zone fit in on the preparedness checklist for North Carolina residents and visitors, either when we're in hurricane season or when we're not in hurricane season?

**Diana:** That's a good question. So, I think this is kind of a two-approach question. So, we'll start with the residents. If you live along the coast, and even inland, actually, you should be thinking about, if not preparing for, hurricane season all year long. So, it's not necessarily, "Okay, now we're in hurricane season. Let's start preparing." You should really be thinking about it ahead of time. And

during these times, it's really important to start your emergency supply kit, and things like this, you would need to add, making sure your emergency papers, some extra cash. Make sure your car is filled up with gasoline if we have a storm that's approaching the area, and really be familiar with alternate routes. Even if you aren't in an evacuation zone, you could still be asked to evacuate for whatever reason. It could be secondary emergencies or hazards that come in with a tropical system or any kind of emergency for that matter.

And when you evacuate, primarily you'll probably stay with family or friends, and you'll probably use shelters as a secondary or tertiary option, and that's okay, but have your options lined out ahead of time. Have somewhere that you can go. You can also consider looking at our North Carolina hurricane guide. We have that also on our website that Katie was talking about a few moments ago, and it's got a lot of information in there about how to prepare before, during and after a storm. And also, during a storm, if you find yourself in the need to go to a shelter, we also have our shelters on the ReadyNC website.

When we don't have a system coming to us, we have tools available online, and one of those is a kid's packet, and they can go on there and identify their evacuations zones, both at home and at school, if they differ, and there's a lot of activities in there where kids can familiarize themselves with various hazards that impact North Carolina. So that's a lot of—of what we see with residents who live there permanently and—and they're consistently preparing. It's very similar for visitors, but it's more of a short-term. Before you go as a visitor, make sure first off that there's no system coming to us that you may be asked to evacuate. So, you may want to try and delay your—your vacation or cancel it altogether. But if you find yourself at along the coast and there is a system, and you're asked to evacuate, you—a lot of times you'll get a realtor packet, and they'll let you know if you are in an evacuation zone, and then you can identify that and watch whatever social media, news outlet where you can find your zone. And then, just get that route planned. It may not be the route that you took to get to your place. And—and make sure that you have a way to safety and know where you're going. So, a little bit similar but different. I think visitors have a bigger bite to chew, I guess you could say, because they may not be familiar with the area as residents may be.

**Kirsten:**

Always heed the warnings of local officials and note that evacuation orders will come from the county level. Evacuations are only called for when the lives and safety of those in the area being evacuated will be at risk. By following evacuation orders, you are not only protecting yourself, but also first responders.

If someone does not live in a predetermined evacuation zone, that does not mean they need to forego having an evacuation plan. Katie, what steps do these individuals need to take to make sure they are safe during hurricane season?

**Katie:**

I think what you said, that that is so true, that that doesn't mean that they don't need an evacuation plan. As Diana mentioned, even if you do not have

predetermined evacuation zones, there's never—that does not mean that you may not be asked by local officials or first responders to leave in a major emergency. We've seen examples of that across the state due to localized flooding in neighborhoods where it's simply not safe to be. The intent behind predetermined evacuation zones are that they help to communicate your risk ahead of a storm. But areas that don't have evacuation zones, while they may not be at risk for those vulnerabilities, doesn't mean that they're not at a risk for something. And so, our goal at NCEM is to be the megaphone and to support local officials in being able to message those evacuation instructions.

So, in order to prepare for hurricane season, predetermined evacuation zones say nothing about what areas would lose power. They say nothing about areas where tree limbs may come down, or where you would need supplies. Right? We know that statewide, everyone should have a kit, everyone should have a communications plan, everyone should know family and friends and how to stay connected. So, while zones can help people in those areas be prepared by highlighting their risk and vulnerability, it is also separate from needing to prepare for hurricane season in totality because you ultimately do want to do what you can ahead of time to prepare you and yourself and your friends and your family by some of those very tangible items such as food, water, flashlight, batteries, things like that.

And so, during hurricane season, you want to stay informed. You want to use trusted sources of information. You want to have your supplies on hand which are in date and things that you would use in an emergency. And most of all, you want to stay aware of the surroundings, being ready to receive information in several ways, whether it be Facebook, Twitter, website. Whether it be phone, news outlets, having those ways and knowing ahead of time how you would get that information is such a key step, and then being ready to respond. And I think that can be sometimes the key factor is people receive the information, and they don't react accordingly. When you do hear in evacuation order or any direction by a local official, being able to take that action and follow accordingly.

**Kirsten:** Diana, do the zones and this initiative impact re-entry after a storm at all?

**Diana:** Well, yes and no. So, one of the positive things about the predetermined evacuation zones is that we were able to limit the over-evacuations of residents and visitors. So, by doing that, you have a re-entry system that is also a little easier or as easy as it could be, considering that you had to evacuate for whatever hazard or emergency. But the evacuation zones aren't just a flip and direct and, "Okay, ABC goes back in." So, really, you'll just need to listen to your local officials on when your neighborhood or your area or county is safe to return to. And then, follow the directions that they're giving to you, not—it won't be the same for every jurisdiction or county, and it won't be the same for every storm. But by and large, you will need to have some sort of identification and anything that would prove that you are trying to get back into an area that may or may not have been cut off from the storms.

**Kirsten:** September is National Preparedness Month. Any final thoughts for our listeners about Know Your Zone or hurricane season?

**Diana:** So, I think as hurricane season as a whole, a lot of people look for the forecast when it comes out in mid-May, and they are either anxious because it's above average, or they let their guard down because it's below average, and that kind of carries through through the season. We have updates on the forecast, and we've actually seen them continue the threat for an above active hurricane season. I think, by and large, that doesn't matter. It could be a below normal season, and we just have that one storm—doesn't have to be a hurricane; it could be a tropical storm—and it still can bring detrimental and significant impacts to an area. So, really do your homework and see what your area is vulnerable to and how you should approach that in preparedness and in response, and what you need to do when a system is coming towards your area and how just to really keep you and your family safe—and your neighbors because they may not have done their homework, either. And you can help us be that megaphone, just basically to keep everybody safe.

**Katie:** And to add on to that, Diana brings up a good point that the seasonal outlook does not say anything about how many storms would actually make landfall. It's just the amount of storms in the tropical Atlantic. And while there may be several but they're away from here, or while there may be one and it's here, it is impactful to the person that it hits. And if that is North Carolina, and that's the only storm of the season, and it was a below average year, it's still impactful and still requires preparation and more so, response and recovery.

I think another final thought would be that preparedness is a personal responsibility, and there is things that you can do that are completely in your control to prepare yourself and your family to do that. And these are easy things, and while they *can* be expensive such as generators, they don't *have* to be totally expensive, like canned food and water. So, there is that personal responsibility, and taking that helps to not only protect and help yourself, but also first responders who would need to go out afterwards.

The last thing that I'll say is, when it comes to evacuations, that's a local decision. Local responders will determine and make those evacuation decisions as they see fit, and so we will continue to point residents and visitors to the point of where is the local information coming from, and that's what we encourage people to get the latest information from. Forecast information coming from reliable sources such as the Weather Service and the National Hurricane Center. But when it comes to decisions, local decisions, look towards those local officials that the Facebook pages, the Twitter pages, those that can be rapidly updated in a situation, and that's where you'll get the information. We have and will continue to put evacuation and shelter information on our website, but to have the latest up-to-date, and to get those decisions and to learn more, we ask people to go to those local sites.

**Kirsten:**

Responding to emergencies can be stressful, and even scary for some. But being prepared beforehand and having a plan can make all the difference. To summarize advice from this episode, go through your emergency preparedness checklist to ensure your plan and kit are up to date. Connect with family or friends outside of your immediate area to make arrangements if you should ever need to evacuate. If this is not an option, locate alternate accommodations that work best for your family. Follow county profiles on social media and activate emergency alerts on your cell phone. Bookmark [readync.gov](http://readync.gov) for helpful information and resources before, during and after a storm. Here you can find resources to build out emergency plans, the kid's packet Diana mentioned and the hurricane guide, and don't forget to visit [knowyourzone.nc.gov](http://knowyourzone.nc.gov). As Katie stated, preparedness is a personal responsibility, but it doesn't have to be stressful. The North Carolina Division of Emergency Management is here to help. Visit NCEM social media channels at NC Emergency to review preparedness tips that were shared throughout the month of September. The Atlantic hurricane season ends November 30th, but preparedness has no expiration date. Update your plans and kits with the changing seasons. Stay safe everyone.

## **Conclusion**

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**Kirsten:**

This is the Safety Scoop, a podcast written, produced and edited by the NCDPS communications team. The mission of the North Carolina Department of Public Safety is to safeguard and preserve the lives and property of the people of North Carolina through preparation, prevention and protection with integrity and honor. Follow the department on social media for a closer look at ongoing initiatives and resources. We're on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram at NC Public Safety. If you enjoyed today's episode, be sure to subscribe to the Safety Scoop on your favorite podcast app. I'm your host, Kirsten Barber. Thanks for listening.

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