Never too early

For Joe Hubbard, the name Wilma will always provoke a certain dread. Hubbard, golf course superintendent at Broken Sound Club in Boca Raton, Fla., has put the golf course back together after a few violent storms during his time there, though none have caused as much havoc as Hurricane Wilma.

Hubbard and his crew had just cleaned up after the damage Hurricane Francis caused in 2004 when Wilma hit the area in October 2005 with 140-mile-per-hour winds and caused more than $1 million worth of damage. It took more than a year to clean up, Hubbard says, adding that trees were wiped out, changing the layout of the course.

“Nothing will ever be exactly as it was before the hurricane,” he says. “You can’t replace the trees; the landscape was devastated.”

Other named storms, including Jeanne, Frances and Katrina tore through the course and left a mess, though none were as devastating as Wilma.

This year, the chances of Hubbard and his crew getting a break look grim. Weather expert William Gray recently released his prediction that there will be 17 named storms this year, five of them major hurricanes. Gray, who heads the Tropical Meteorology Project at Colorado State University, says the probability of a major storm reaching land on the U.S. coast this year is 74 percent, compared with the average of 52 percent throughout the past century.

While hurricane season is still a few months away, golf course superintendents who’ve been affected by storms say it’s not too early to form an emergency plan. Hubbard was the first of his team to get to the course after Hurricane Wilma, allowing the crew to put their families’ safety first. He spent many hot, humid nights on a cot in his office as he and the crew worked seven days a week to get the course back into shape. The power was out for several days, which made the high temperatures more unbearable.

The crew cleaned up the downed oak and Ficus trees, replaced the damaged sod and refilled the bunkers. Bunker sand had blown probably 50 miles away, Hubbard says. He brought in heavy equipment, including...
was wrapping up, helped boost but says some courses spent the money to have them on hand.

Hubbard hired contractors and temporary workers to share some of the workload with his crew. The blow Wilma dealt, just after cleanup from Jeanne was wrapping up, helped boost low morale among the workers, Hubbard says.

"I increased the crew's hours for a couple of months and put more money into my people's pockets," he says. "They had more money to help their families."

In the wake of such disasters, Hubbard would like to see more collaboration. Golf courses with less damage should put politics aside and help neighboring courses who aren't as lucky.

Terry Wood, golf course superintendent at Naples National Golf Club, says the last time a major hurricane hit that part of Florida was Donna in 1960. But even storms considered minor can cause damage. After Wilma blew through in 2005, the course was left with $1.5 million worth of damage.

The course was just starting its season and had been open for two or three weeks when news of a storm came through. The course was closed the day before it was supposed to hit that area. This gave the staff time to move their families to a safe place. The storm dumped more than five inches of rain on the golf course — not bad compared to other locations and other storms that year, Wood says. But the winds that accompanied it were enough to cause considerable damage.

"We lost more than 635 trees, many of them pine trees," he says.

Wood's 24-man crew was on the course the day after the storm helping to make it playable again. Contractors helped grind the trees and haul the stumps away. With the exception of a roof, most damage was contained to the debris scattered around the course, Wood says. The power outage lasted for a few days.

Hubbard and Wood say people in general are more prepared for hurricanes now than they were two years ago. More businesses are ready with backup generators. Golf courses in storms' paths have better ideas about how to prepare for a natural disaster.

Hubbard and Wood already have started to prepare for the storm season. Items on their checklists include:

- Create hurricane preparedness kits that include flashlights, medical supplies, contact sheets with information for emergency generators and a bottled water supplier;
- Meet with the other department heads and create or review an emergency plan;
- Keep a list of emergency contact information for all employees;
- Have the name of a reliable tree contractor lined up;
- Avoid as much tree damage as possible by trimming trees before the hurricane season starts; and
- Keep an adequate fuel supply. Be sure gas pumps are manual, not electric, in case power is lost.

Storm seasons don't always turn out how they're predicted. For example, Gray forecast 17 named storms for 2006 including nine hurricanes, five of them major ones.

Wood says. But Hubbard doesn't focus on the numbers.

"Whether they say there will be two or 30 storms, we always try to stay prepared," he says. "That's what a true Floridian does." - HW