

Authorities glow over new, natural emergency shelter

11:37 PM CDT on Tuesday, March 31, 2009

Bill Capo / Eyewitness News

bcapo@wwltv.com

PLAQUEMINES, La. -- Hurricane season begins in less than three months, and emergency responders are refining plans for all levels of storm protection. A Plaquemines Parish woman may be the first to move into the next generation of emergency shelter.

Video: Watch the Story

<http://www.wwltv.com/local/stories/wwl033109cbplaqshelter.8ec55301.html>

For Gloria Denet, her new home was the answer to a prayer. After two years in a FEMA trailer, this fourth generation Plaquemines Parish resident couldn't afford to replace the house that flooded in Katrina.

"It was a shock, it was a big shock. I wanted to cry, and I wanted to laugh, and everybody said don't cry, don't laugh, but the tears were streaming down my face," Denet said.

The home was donated to Denet, and she is the first to have one. It's a demonstration of a new type of post disaster emergency housing. It took 10 people just nine days to build it.

Also Online

[PHOTOS: Take a tour of the home](#)

"If I wasn't here today, touching and feeling it, I wouldn't believe it, said Billy Nungesser, Plaquemines Parish President. "Because I came a few times during construction. I got to tell you, I didn't think they could do it this quick."

"We stood here and we watched them build the house from the foundation to the finish, and it was just a miracle," Denet said.

The two bedroom, nearly 800-square foot home arrived in a kit, designed for quick construction as emergency housing after a disaster. The idea came from a Baltimore

based company with facilities in Louisiana.

"It was originally designed as a call to action by Congress post Katrina for alternative solutions. It was designed specifically as an alternative to manufactured housing," said Mike Morgan, president of Critical Response Networks.

But what has captured a lot of interest is the construction method. The house rests on pilings screwed eight feet into the ground. But the main frame is composed of thick wall-boards connected by metal framework. These boards are made by a Texas company from wheat and rice straw, the tightly compressed stems and leaves that are normally not used.

"In our country, we plant approximately 60 million acres of wheat a year. 12-13 million tons of it get burned. So this manufacturer had been making this wallboard, this agricultural wallboard for many years. But the concept, I wonder if we can put it into a house," Morgan said.

It's natural material. There's no formaldehyde, and it is rated to withstand 140 miles-per-hour winds. Members of the construction crew laughed when a horse found a piece of the wallboard and ate it. This use of plant material that is normally discarded caught the attention of state officials.

"Oh, it's great, it's a renewable resource. It's recycling at its best. It's turning a raw product of wheat into a building material," said Tim Walker with the Louisiana Agriculture Department.

As FEMA began looking beyond trailers to find the next generation of post disaster housing, this idea won a federal contract.

"We're happy that a local, a state company from Louisiana was awarded this contract. They were one of seven. We're exploring housing solutions that follow natural disasters," said Andrew Thomas with FEMA.

Morgan said that if an event happened, they would be able to within days ship out 50 units every 30 days.

At this Baton Rouge warehouse, 100 of the so-called Ready Shelters are stored. Each house requires four-pallets of the special wallboard, one with the metal connectors, and two more with everything from wiring to appliances, even sheets, and pots and pans. They are waiting for the government to call when the next disaster strikes.

"Within a day or two we could ship these out. I mean these are pre-positioned here

ready to ship," Morgan said, adding it would take eight to nine days to ship.

But as they began putting together the house kits, they realized that in many cases after disasters, a lot of people are not looking just for temporary housing, they are looking for a place to live long term, and that this idea fits that need.

"Affordable housing," Morgan said. "We're looking at lower income housing, people that can't get back into rebuilding."

In Plaquemines, Nungesser said 550 people are still living in FEMA trailers, and he is seeking funding to help them get into permanent housing. He was fascinated by this idea.

"If we can qualify those people and we have over 100 people on the list, we can move quickly, and in a matter of a month have these people in homes," Nungesser said.

"It would be real nice if it would happen for people to live in houses instead of living in trailers," Denet said.