



Catastrophic Storm Cleanup can be a tricky proposition



By Rick Howland

By the July 4th weekend, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration had confirmed more than 1,600 tornados in the U.S. That makes 2011 already the deadliest tornado year since 1936, even though at the time of the writing of this article we were just about half way through the twister season.

You're likely familiar with the language of the forecasters: "large storm system... associated frontal boundary... super cells, heavy wind, torrential rain, hail, tornadoes" followed by "severe and widespread damage."

To the tree care company entrepreneur these words spark thoughts of "business opportunity." Take, for example, the image of Joplin, Missouri, where virtually every tree visible to the horizon in all directions was leveled or broken. It will be months before all that debris is processed.

But before you hitch up the chipper, jump in your bucket truck and head to the next storm ground zero, stop and think! The work is indeed there, but getting the

job and getting paid for it can pose more of a challenge than you think or are prepared to handle.

There are three levels of storm clean-up work:

- ▶ the independent
- ▶ those pre-approved by insurance companies or via professional association, and
- ▶ what are called federally approved first responders

Nick's Tree Service out of Broken Arrow, Oklahoma, represents the experi-



A typical Joplin, Missouri, street immediately after the tornado. Courtesy of Terry Tree Service.

The view across the street from St. John's Regional Medical Center shows the destructive power of the F5 Tornado that hit Joplin, Missouri. Photo courtesy of Mercy Health at flickr.com.

ence of an independent tree care pro heading into a disaster area, specifically, the May 22 Joplin tornado.

"We are near Tulsa, about three hours from Joplin," says Elliot Taylor, vice president of the TCIA-member company. "I heard how badly things were messed up, so I jumped in my truck and drove up. I was on site myself for a full day assessing the situation,"

Returning to company headquarters he mobilized his dad, Nick, for whom the company is named, his brothers and two crewmembers as well as himself. The team convoyed a 25-ton, 120-foot-reach telescoping truck crane, T320 Bobcat compact skid loader, Rayco RG90 self-propelled stump grinder, high-capacity Bandit 280HD heavy duty chipper and 62-foot aerial lift bucket truck with an 8-foot-tall, 17-foot-long dump bed.

"Joplin was utter devastation. Everyone

was obviously all shook up,” says Taylor. “Here is what I ran into a lot: Most of the problems were trees on a house. I would explain that I have a crane and a truck and can get that tree off your house. In better neighborhoods, those comfortable with their finances could pay you and deal with the insurance companies. In other neighborhoods, people would say they had to wait on their insurance agent. Three weeks later, they were still waiting.”

“The upshot was that we got about four days of work and reached a lot of dead-ends. So we went home, but there was so much work we could have worked for three months steady,” he says.

“I noticed a lot of volunteers going into wealthy neighborhoods. But what puzzled me was the urging to volunteers to help their fellow citizens and to start by getting debris off homes and other structures. It’s like using volunteers to get a free workforce to get past claims. Then professional tree care companies have trouble doing service for a fair price. Volunteers provide a marginal service, sometimes doing more damage in the process. As I see it,” he says, “the insurance company now may not have to pay some claims and the homeowner is left with hacked up material in the yard that is no longer covered by the insurance policy. The consumer gets hurt with a crappy job and little insurance payout.”

All that being said, “Even those four days were good ones with a lot of very good contacts,” Taylor says. He’s more encouraged for the future. “We did the Fayetteville (2009 Arkansas) ice storm. We went there for a month and a half. Customers loved what we did and said whenever we got back there would be a batch for work for us. One guy we did an \$8,500 job for, then subsequently did a job for a neighbor and then got a call back from the original customer. Another customer was a school teacher who knows a lot of people in Fayetteville, and it’s a close-knit community. One of our first jobs was for a yoga teacher who knows a lot of prominent wives. It’s referrals.”

Ray Gilliam, owner of TCIA-member Gilliam’s Tree Service Professionals in Kingsport, Tennessee, has been busy working to clean up after a smaller, yet rather messy tornado April 9, donating time and equipment and mobilizing the Navy



In the bucket, an employee of Gilliam’s Tree Service Professionals in Kingsport, Tennessee, chunks down a tornado damaged tree on the grounds of a VA hospital in Johnson City, Tenn., after an April 9, 2011, tornado, while Navy Seabees provide clean up assistance. Photo by Teresa Gilliam.

Seabees to clean up tree debris on the grounds of a VA hospital in Johnson City.

“The VA was a unique situation. When I called to see if they wanted help there were two related entities to deal with. One was

the Mountain Home Cemetery, a national cemetery with separate budget. For that, you have to be on the Central Contractors Registry (a pre-approved contractor list, part of doing work for the federal govern-

Eager for Storm Work? Experience Says Prepare In Advance!

Kevin Caldwell, president of Caldwell Tree Care, an accredited TCIA member company in Roswell, Georgia, is a TCIA board member and a veteran of nearly a dozen major storm responses, including this spring/summer’s outbreak, having called out five crews from his own company and others. His advice for those considering this type of work is to be prepared.

What is the one thing you can do in advance?

“Every circumstance is different, and we know that at any given time we can get a call,” says Caldwell, whose company is also an HMI member that responds on behalf of insurance companies. “So the biggest thing we do is diligent maintenance of equipment. And I know from experience that because my equipment is in great shape I was able to take advantage of this situation,

he says of the recent storms.

“I always require vigorous maintenance. You can’t plan for a storm. At most you may have a day’s notice of bad weather. With tornados, you just never know,” he says.

Caldwell warns that there is a small window of opportunity when responding to a storm’s aftermath.

“You have to be there in the first 24 to 48 hours, and you have about a 10- to 14-day window to get the bulk of your work done,” he says, noting that the longest he and his crews were out of town on storm cleanup was 30 days; the shortest was seven.

He explains that there is an intense sales effort involved, largely due to the shifting psychological state of the client. “Initially, it is the devastation, then a certain negativity sets in as peo-

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ment). If you are not on the list, you will not be asked to quote a job.

As Gilliam explains it, you have to prove adequate insurance, licenses, certifications, for example, for use of pesticides. "I had to go on the Internet where it shows all the steps required to get certified," he says.

"It took me eight hours at the cemetery, and I realized the job was too large for my company and that I could not let my regu-

lar customers go to do it." He explains that work would require re-sodding and restoration of the cemetery, which was outside the scope of his company.

However, at the adjacent VA hospital, the story was a bit different. The place was littered with very old – upwards of 100-year-old – specimens, uprooted or broken.

Because of budgetary constraints, hospital officials said they would have to do the work in-house. As a Navy reservist, Gilliam asked if he could call in his Seabees buddies on a volunteer basis to do what they could on a weekend.

They set up on May 14-15 and performed about \$50,000 in volunteer work, taking down 50 trees damaged or destroyed by the twister. He says his next mission is to engage other local TCIA members in the area to volunteer to get more done. "It will take another three to four weekends to clean up the hospital grounds completely," he explains.

That was just one event. Throughout the spring season, just about every storm that has come through his area has been what



Caldwell Tree Care staff worked the storm damage in conjunction with Carolina Tree and Nationwide Insurance, with a total of four crews and their related equipment. Courtesy Caldwell Tree Care.

Gilliam describes as "a regular event, with trees on houses." He does much of his work in cooperation with a longstanding relationship with one large national insurance firm.

"Before the storms hit, I had been telling customers I had a backlog of six weeks. With all the hitting we are now at 12 weeks. On one Sunday, a storm came thru and I went from 78 jobs behind to 116. I still have a tree on my own hot tub."

As far as prepping for such events,

Prepare in advance

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ple get angry and critical of the costs, imagining things like price gouging."

Regarding the April 27 storm striking Tuscaloosa and Chattanooga, "I remember it well. It was my birthday, and we were at a meeting," Caldwell recalls. "HMI called. We have worked with them for years, mostly individual jobs. They said they needed four to five crews in Chattanooga, Tennessee, the next morning and asked what we could do. I said I would make it happen."

Caldwell says he called TCIA colleagues in North Carolina and Atlanta and put together what he called "four and a half to five crews, depending on configuration. Altogether, we had 21 people on the ground," adding "We have a company culture here where people understand that if they want to make a larger check, we leave a skeleton crew in the office and travel."

"We ended up sending three bucket trucks, two grapple trucks, a mini skid,

three Bobcats, several chip trucks and lots of rigging devices. We find that in storms the availability of cranes is limited. We rigged all our trees from houses."

"The BIG question in these large-scale storms always is – do you bring a chipper? Out of the 11 storms I have worked, we have used a chipper three times. We did not chip much in the beginning in Chattanooga, though we were required in one municipality to haul debris because of a local ordinance. Typically, what's used are grapple loading trucks because in the normal course of storm work we get trees off homes and to the street for another contractor to come by for pickup."

"Some situations you just cannot plan for. You almost have to plan for a backup. Let's say you did not bring a chipper. Typical storm work is to get trees off the houses and stage debris to be hauled away, but you find there is no place to put debris. In some cases, removal is a requirement of the job. Or your equipment breaks. You always have to have someone and something on standby. That's another reason maintenance is so important," he concludes.

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Gilliam says he was worked for that one insurance company for many years, and the two know and trust one another. "We work by the hour and charge time-and-half. We get to OT in about 2.5 days, and I have to be mindful of overworking my crew – someone can get hurt."

"I usually bring in a Caterpillar track loader with a grapple or Bobcat A300 skid steer to lift logs out, and all kinds of climbing gear. Cranes are handy, but you may not be able to get them in where they're needed," Gilliam notes. "Also, this is a mountainous area, and cranes are not always viable."

"In a storm situation, you need to be flexible and accommodate folks. The first week after the tornados, all we did was toss stuff off and tarp roofs. This is handy and economical for the insurance company and an extra service a tree care company can offer."

HMI, a TCIA Associate Member company, provides a novel, streamlined service that matches tree care companies with insurance company-approved jobs. (These can be as simple as a single tree that has fallen on a residential or commercial customer's home or facility, or as complex as managing an insurance carrier's neighborhood-by-neighborhood exposure following a major storm event.) HMI claims to be the only company in the U.S. that specializes in providing the insurance industry with comprehensive claims support for tree damage and landscape losses.

The result is an organized response that benefits all involved.

According to Doug Cowles, president of HMI, "We have copyrighted our first responder program. Our insurance clients pay to register, as do tree care service companies. We run a highly structured, rigid protocol for assignments limiting who can call for deployment of tree care service and who can cancel them." HMI can deploy approved tree care crews in advance of a major storm threat or immediately after.

"Our message to the insurance companies with respect to anything involving landscaping or tree care material is that our members can act as everything from consulting (including estimating) to emergency cleanup," Cowles explains.

For authorized members (TCIA accredited and ISA certified), "We have the process in place to get them qualified jobs and get

These are some of the 200 self loaders TCIA member Terry Tree Service had operating in both Joplin, Missouri, and Tuscaloosa, Alabama. The sub-contractors for Terry Tree came from Portland, Oregon, to Portland, Maine, and Miami, Florida, to Bakersfield, California. Courtesy Terry Tree Service.



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Gilliam's Tree Service crew members and Navy Seabees clean up tree debris at the VA hospital in Johnson City, Tenn. Photo by Teresa Gilliam.

them paid quickly. We answer the questions of the (tree care) business owner when is he going about the effort to get guys out and potentially into harm's way. For example, 'How do I get work and get paid quickly and get home?' In the fog of a post-storm situation, Cowles says, there is

often no methodology to get paid to fix a problem, such as getting tree off a house."

Cowles says that unlike an independent company that has to work with a homeowner then perhaps wait for the homeowner to get paid from the insurance company before getting paid for the tree

work, "We (HMI) get and qualify the leads), get the work approved with the insurance companies (often within hours of a written estimate), and the insurance companies pay the (member tree care company) directly. It's a low-risk deployment," Cowles adds. "If you get there and we cannot qualify enough work, we and the insurance carriers will ensure members' costs are covered."

He warns that there is also a downside. If a company is committed to working with HMI it may not be able to take a big job. "There are some tradeoffs."

Right now, the HMI network has more than 50 members representing upward of 1,500 arborists and 2,500 crews, which makes it capable of covering about 75 percent of the U.S. population base, according to Cowles.

During the recent tornado outbreak, Cowles says, "We had, at any one time, 15 members working exclusively for us, mobilized into the affected area. Plus, we worked with members who were stationed in the local market."

"Our authorized members do their own crew configurations with one estimator per two three-man crews. The important point to remember is that HMI is in the middle of all the administration issues and does not leave members dangling when it comes time for collection."

"There is a small fee to join and a small percentage taken off the work. Our model is that if the members are successful, we are," says Cowles, adding that the requirements to be an authorized HMI member were assembled in collaboration with TCIA. "Right now we are just rolling out to our authorized members an industry first, a warranty program so that members can offer a warranty to restore a site to its pre-storm condition," Cowles says.

* Jay Hager, branch manager for TCIA-member Arbor Masters, headquartered in Shawnee, Kansas, worked the recent Tuscaloosa and Birmingham tornado events, deployed by HMI.

"The fact that we are already vetted (equipment and qualifications are checked off) ahead of time cuts our costs," Hager says, "and it makes the interface painless because someone else handles a lot of the back office needs."

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scale catastrophic event, we get a call from HMI and go out to look at the situation to see if, for example, a tree is on a house," Hager says. "We write the estimate, take photos and get homeowners to sign off, letting them know or remind them that we are an approved contractor for their insurance company. We send the information to HMI, which uploads it to the insurance company database that manages claims. We get approval pretty quick. During the tornados, we would get approvals sometimes in an hour, but typically in three to four. After the job, we would bill and the insurance company would cut us a check within a week."

Hager says Arbor Masters was running five crews totaling 15 tree care professionals. Equipment deployed included bucket trucks, skid steers, a few chippers ("We did not do much chipping," says Hager), climbing equipment, log loaders and one crane at each location (Tuscaloosa and Birmingham). The work was largely described as getting trees off lines and structures and stacking material, large and small, for pickup by other vendors.

"We were out for 10 days," Hager says, "working 10 to 12 hours a day."

When it comes to storm cleanup, at the top of the food chain are major first-tier storm responder contractors who are essentially strategic partners with the federal government specializing in disaster recovery. Typically, they are charged with removing construction and tree debris. There are only a handful of companies doing this, and they will be running their own crews as well as previously approved sub-contractors, calling in several hundred affiliated companies to manage storm cleanup.

In the event of a major storm, companies rushing to get work with a bucket truck and chipper are likely to be turned away from major, secured areas unless they have been given prior approval by Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) personnel or other authorities.

TCIA-member Terry Tree Serv, LLC, based in Rochester, New York, is one of those previously approved companies that has been committed to the assistance of disaster recovery since 1995. The company has put together an organization that, along with its subcontractors, has the capacity to

mobilize within 48 hours more than 200 dump trucks and trailers, numerous skid steers, 75 self-loading grapple trucks and 25 front loaders, which might result in them having more than 100 crews and 400 workers in the field.

The company reports that as a first tier subcontractor during Hurricane Katrina removing debris under contract in New Orleans, the area of responsibility covered

more than 8 square city miles that included more than 15,000 homes. Terry was tasked with debris removal tree work and house demolitions. In order to accomplish the task, Terry Tree Service managed more than 50 crews, consisting of 300-plus workers in the field, and utilized 100 dump trucks/trailers, 40 self-loading grapple trucks, 10 excavators, five front loaders, 25 Bobcats and 50 bucket trucks.

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whelmed by an event, it goes to the next level for assistance, such as the county, state and federal levels. At the highest level, such as Hurricane Katrina or the tornados in Tuscaloosa or Joplin, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers is tasked to handle cleanup. The Army Corps gets contracting under way," Pope explains.

"Where we step in is with other contractors who are awarded what are known as pre-position contracts." (These, he explains, are major, pre-approved federal contractors who have been pre-screened for such work to include equipment levels, equipment readiness, training, licensing and prior history.) We are subs to them. They task us to bring our management, equipment and experience and to get boots on the ground immediately. I have been doing this for 20 years," Pope says.

"We know the program. We get the call, and off we go. Our learning curve was years ago," he notes.

Typically, even before the cleanup contracts are in place, Terry gets the call. "Time is of the essence. I was in Tuscaloosa two days after the tornados occurred. The next morning I was off to Joplin to get there to do a resources assessment," Pope says. "We will bring in our own resources plus other supplemental resource (Terry's own pre-approved subs) and manage the task to ensure everyone follows rules and regula-

tions." (That includes review of qualification, safety procedures, up-to-date and proper insurance and the process to ensure everyone gets paid.)


Pope says, "We have several companies who have been working with us for years and years, and we do bring on new subs. We go through the vetting process in the off-season when we can bring everyone up to speed so that when an event occurs (such as the recent tornado outbreak) we are up to speed and can call on personnel and equipment.

"What we do is travel to conferences, including TCIA events, to meet with people," he says, adding that potential subs can go to the Terry Tree Service website for a subcontractor log-in page. (visit www.terrytree.com)

To give you an example of how much and how fast Terry can mobilize, Pope says that "Within 24 hours we had, in Tuscaloosa, 70 knuckleboom loaders on site, and even before the contracts are actually approved, we're going through the process when equipment shows up of checking for safety, drivers' licenses, registrations, lights, alarms and other safety equipment to ensure that we have good equipment." Pope explains that the contract approval process takes about a week to 10 days. "In the meantime, we anticipate the need and get our resources moving in that direction."

When asked if there was one thing he wanted to stress, Pope says, "The most dangerous things I see are crews working around wires either in the air or on the ground, including underground transformers. Working around utilities is handled very differently (from regular tree care); every wire has to be treated as if it is energized. We watch very closely," he says.

The bottom line seems to be that the time to prepare your company and crews to cope with and profit from any kind of disaster is well before it strikes. Get to know your major local insurance carriers and get pre-approved vendor status. Get to know the majors in terms of tree damage remediation and first tier disaster responders. Work to get sub contractor status from them, which could be in any market, and use your list of affiliations, certifications, training and equipment in your marketing materials.

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