

# Hurricane Irma debris piles could be around for months



Piles of debris piled up along streets and in front of homes following Hurricane Irma could be sitting there for weeks before clean up.

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**G**et used to those debris piles on the side of the road from Hurricane Irma. They could still be around at Halloween or even Thanksgiving.

Some South Florida cities haven't started their cleanups more than a week after Irma blew through the region, while others are having trouble getting contractors they were counting on to do the work. Then there's the sheer volume of debris that has to be trucked away, including fallen trees and branches, downed fencing and damaged drywall.

Piles of debris can lead to rodent infestations if left uncollected for months, said Timothy O'Connor, a spokesman for the Florida Department of Health in Palm Beach County. They can also create a stench as the vegetation decomposes and be a fire hazard as they dry out, officials said. They also cause hazards on roads as drivers swerve to avoid spillover.

"The longer it goes it is a potential harborage for rodents and rats. They might move in. It's something we definitely will be watching for," O'Connor said. Debris piles from previous storms didn't result in a health threat, he said.

The Solid Waste Authority of Palm Beach County estimates it could take as long as three months to get all the piles removed in its service area. Officials estimate there are about 3 million cubic yards of debris to collect in the county, enough to cover an entire football field — end zones included — with a 140-story-tall pile of debris.

Miami-Dade and Broward counties are anticipating a two-month cleanup. Many individual cities say they're looking at a month to two months to clear their streets and swales.

"There's some debris removal taking place, but it's not at the level that we would like it to be, and it is not at the level we had planned for," Hollywood spokeswoman Raelin Storey said, estimating a two-month effort in her city.

There are a couple of things homeowners can do to help cleanup crews: keep vegetative debris separated from fencing and other yard waste, and keep bagged yard debris separate from the other piles. Residents who are used to placing their garbage, yard debris and other waste in alleyways for collection are being asked to put them curbside in front of their homes until further notice.

Even cities that were able to start hauling debris away quickly after the hurricane came through say it will take time to pickup everything out there. Many say it will take two or three passes through their cities to do the job: one phase for the vegetation, one phase for construction-related materials and then possibly a final clean-up.

Boca Raton currently has 29 trucks picking up debris, handling about 6,000 to 8,000 cubic yards a day, said Chrissy Gibson, the city's communications manager. But with an estimated 200,000 cubic yards of debris in the city, enough to fill about 20 Olympic-sized swimming pools, the hauling could take a month or more to complete.

Boca Raton established a temporary dump site on Banyan Boulevard, near its Mizner Bark dog park, to allow a faster turnaround time for trucks to unload the debris and get back to the neighborhoods to pick up more. Otherwise, trucks would have needed to haul debris to a dump at U.S. 441 and Atlantic Avenue west of Delray Beach, a much longer trip.

Pompano Beach also began picking up the debris last week and has had more than 40 trucks working. It had cleared more than 25,000 cubic yards — the volume of almost three Olympic-sized pools — as of Monday, spokeswoman Sandra King said.

But others cities, such as Plantation and North Lauderdale, have not started their clean-ups yet.

"The availability of vehicles and equipment are competing with all other Florida municipalities ... in addition to Houston," said Horace McHugh, Plantation's chief administrative officer.

Homeowner communities that have private waste hauling contracts are responsible for their own debris removal, although some cities are offering to make arrangements with associations to pick up their debris as well.

Many Broward cities are having trouble getting their hauling contractors to start cleaning up the mess. Those cities have contracts with haulers who are relying on subcontractors, and those subcontractors are more interested in taking their work to places paying more to have the debris removed, Hollywood's Storey said.

"People understandably want to get back to life as normal, as quickly as possible," Storey said. "They want debris picked up. We're doing everything we possibly can."

During a conference call between Broward's emergency management officials and municipal representatives Tuesday morning, a Southwest Ranches official said a lot of the town's haulers aren't showing up to do collection and disposal because of a higher rate they're able to get in Miami-Dade County.

Broward city officials fear they will risk losing potential federal reimbursement of their clean-up costs if they raise the rates they pay for debris removal. The federal government in the past has covered up to 75 percent of the costs, leaving the state and cities to divide the rest.

The cleanup is going to cost millions of dollars. In Palm Beach County alone, the cost will be in the tens of millions of dollars, Solid Waste Authority spokesman Willie Puz said.

Broward County Administrator Bertha Henry is preparing a letter to Gov. Rick Scott seeking his help in appealing to the Federal Emergency Management Agency for flexibility so that the debris can get picked up quickly without threatening federal reimbursements. The lengthy pickup time could cause problems if another hurricane were to move into the area, with the debris becoming projectiles in the high winds, she said.

Miami-Dade County isn't expecting to have as much debris with Irma as it did in 2005, when it dealt with the combined mess left by hurricanes Katrina and Wilma, said Gayle Love, spokeswoman for the county's Solid Waste Management Department.

The big difference she sees when traveling the roads is that a greater portion of Irma's debris is vegetative, not from damaged roofs and buildings.

"All you see are just really big piles of trees. I don't see roof trusses and drywall," Love said. "What I'm seeing on the streets is a lot of green waste, which has now turned brown, and a lot of fencing."

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