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### Assessing damage now easier

By **TIMOTHY J. GIBBONS**

*The Times-Union*

When Florida Department of Health officials took to the streets in the aftermath of Hurricane Charley, they brought with them software created in Jacksonville that transformed how they assisted victims of the storm.

Now, community health officials have even more ambitious plans for the GeoAge product if the wind, rain and tidal surge of Hurricane Frances strike the First Coast.

GeoAge's Mobile Emergency Response System allows government officials to forgo paper reports, gathering the data instead on personal digital assistants. More importantly, this data -- such as who needs ice or water or first aid -- is then tagged with geographical coordinates and transmitted instantaneously to emergency headquarters, where it can be sliced and diced and used by different levels of emergency respondents.

"It gives us cold, hard stats, and it gives them to us fast," said Bill Dunlap, who's been handling volunteer logistics for the Department of Health, "rather than a piece of paper that you have to enter into a database or something like that."

Jerry Merckel, now a professor at the University of North Florida, came up with the idea that has become GeoAge in the aftermath of Hurricane Andrew. Working with David Lambert and John Alexander -- who were then at the University of Florida, but are now also at UNF -- Merckel came up with a tablet PC that could help property assessors do their job.

That technology has gone through several changes over the last decade.

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Ties to UNF

GeoAge is the first company spun off from UNF research. The company can be contacted through [www.geoage.com](http://www.geoage.com).

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"The big change between Hurricane Andrew and today, the major new technological component, is the

Internet," Merckel said.

Officials involved with the cleanup efforts can now access that information through a Web site, getting big-picture views -- like how many people required first aid in a certain area -- as well as more granular information, such as what a particular house needs. Before, it would have taken weeks for the health assessment reports to cycle through the system.

"There's people in the home office and people in the field who go on the site to see what we've found out," said Dunlap, the Health Department employee. "It speeds things up."

If Frances hits Jacksonville, the GeoAge software will also be used for property damage assessments. Information on property values has already been loaded into the hand-held devices, giving assessors access to a wealth of information while they're in the field.

"You could be standing on a concrete slab and what's left of the house is a few feet away," said Michael Rowley, the company's chief executive officer. "The [Global Positioning Satellites] will tell you what the address is."

For less severe cases, assessors can chose options like "damaged roof," and the database will calculate how much repairs will cost.

In the past, Rowley said, it would take up to seven weeks to handle the paperwork for federal aid, which is based on the amount of damage that occurs. With GeoAge, he said, it takes two days.

GeoAge is the first company spun off from work done at the University of North Florida, which usually focuses on sponsored research. Many of the company's employees, including 10 of the initial hires, are alumni of the school.

That, said Merckel, the inventor of the technology, is the sort of impact he hoped GeoAge would have on Jacksonville's economy.

"The biggest thrill personally," he said, "is going over to GeoAge and everyone in development group are our students. They have a great job, they're having fun. It's really great to see them over there."

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