LEE COUNTY: PROTECTING PARKS & RECREATION IN LIGHTNING-PRONE SOUTHWEST FLORIDA

Lee County is a large county on the southwest coast of Florida on the Gulf Coast. Spanning 787 square miles, this county is home to over 700,000 residents. While each town has its own parks and recreation department, Lee County Parks & Recreation works together with all of them. Established in the 1970s, Lee County Parks & Recreation oversees 31,500 acres of parks, preserves, facilities, and other sites. They also have four recreation centers, 10 community centers, nine swimming pools, and seven boat ramps.

A TRAGEDY SPURS A COMMUNITY TO ACTION

Thunderstorms, bringing heavy rain, local flooding, and high winds, are a daily occurrence in Lee County, Florida. Prior to 2012, the Parks & Recreation Department used lightning prediction tools and the "flash-to-bang" method to keep those at their facilities safe. However, on October 3rd, 2012 tragedy struck. While football coaches were still inside, they sent their middle school team out to the field to practice at Southwest Florida Christian Academy. During that time a "bolt out of the blue" struck and killed 11-year-old football player Jesse Watlington. "There was no National Weather Service alert," according to Alise Flanajck, Deputy Director of the department. "Our prediction systems didn't work either, so we moved into a different frame of mind after this tragic accident."

TOTAL COUNTY-WIDE LIGHTNING SAFETY

After this tragedy, the community started a movement aimed at improving lightning safety procedures. Lee County Parks & Recreation led the charge by installing 23 Outdoor Alerting Systems. These systems are located throughout athletic fields, parks, and even the spring training facility for the Boston Red Sox. They are connected to the Earth Networks Total Lightning Network (ENTLN) and weather network, which includes hyperlocal weather data from over 10,000 stations worldwide. Together with countdown clocks, mobile alerts, two weather stations, and weather visualization tools, Lee County Parks & Recreation now has an organized, accountable method for protection for everyone throughout the county.

The automated weather solution helped us in the long run. It provides real-time intelligence we need to make informed weather-related decisions. And most importantly, it helps us to protect people's safety while they are out in the parks

– Alise Flanjack, Deputy Director or Lee County Parks & Recreation

WHY IT MATTERS

Even one death is too many when it comes to severe weather. Now, Lee County is one of the most protected counties in the country when it comes to thunderstorms, hurricanes, and other dangerous conditions. By relying on total lightning detection rather than lightning prediction, Lee County is using the latest meteorological technology to protect folks outdoors no matter where they are.

Lee County Parks & Recreation now has peace of mind, as 1,319,385 total lightning strikes were detected over its 787 square miles throughout 2017.

OPTIMIZE OUTDOOR SAFETY AND SEVERE WEATHER PREPAREDNESS

OVERVIEW

Lee County, FL sought a severe weather detection and alerting solution after a bolt of lightning struck and killed a young football player out of the blue.

CHALLENGES

The lightning prediction tools the county was using were outdated and unreliable, so they missed the strike that resulted in the fatality. The county needed a comprehensive, science-backed lightning detection tool and alerting system that would help move people to safety.

SOLUTION

Lee county deployed 23 Outdoor Alerting Systems, two weather stations, and uses custom mobile alerts from Earth Networks to keep people safe from Florida's daily thunderstorms. They also utilize web-based weather visualization software to see lightning-strikes and other severe weather conditions in real-time.

RESULTS

There should be no more fatal "out of the blue" lightning strikes in Lee County thanks to their community's commitment to severe weather safety and the superior total lightning detection capabilities of their Earth Networks tools.