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Businesses paying up for disaster prevention

In Wilma's wake, South Florida companies are increasingly taking steps to protect their businesses from disasters.

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Pompano Beach insurance agency Frank H. Furman Inc. didn't wait for Hurricane Wilma to hit. It put in the call last Friday to its business recovery service to get a mobile-home-like unit on the road, equipped with satellite phones and Internet, computer stations and servers.

Tuesday morning, Furman's office had no power or phones but agents were busy calling customers and processing claims from the trailer parked in the company's lot.

"I don't anticipate any lost income at all," said Dirk DeJong, president. "We're fully operational. We've been getting claims out via satellite."

After being socked with a punishing series of hurricanes in the past two seasons, South Florida businesses are starting to get smart.

Companies are signing up by the droves for everything from waterproof/fireproof safes to data protection services to cellular building repeater systems.

"Unfortunately, it does take a disaster for people to say 'holy cow! We should have had this in place'," said Johnny Klemme, marketing director of K.L. Security Enterprises, an Indiana company that sells indestructible safes for computer hard-drives and waterproof/fireproof filing cabinets.

The now-familiar post-hurricane panorama of extended power outages, vast wind destruction and severe flooding is making companies all too aware of the hazards of not taking precautions to protect valuable data, as well as the importance of staying open for business despite an emergency.

"We cannot afford to be down at all," said Thomas Travis, managing partner of Miami's Sandler Travis & Rosenberg. "We live in a global economy where communication is instantaneous, we work 24 hours a day."

The law firm is one of a dozen new clients that have come knocking at Terremark's downtown Miami bunker since Monday.

In a windowless, fortified steel and concrete facility designed to withstand a Category 5 hurricane, Terremark can store computer hardware and software prior to a storm or jump-start a company's servers and Internet in a posterior blackout.

Armed with its own generators, fuel, air-conditioning system and food and water for personnel, Terremark can maintain itself as an island in the middle of a storm for more than three weeks -- continuously maintaining its

network connectivity.

Since last year, business has jumped more than 10 percent, said Terremark's Chief Marketing Officer Javier Rodríguez. Still this week marked a few firsts.

"We've seen things we've never seen before," he said. ``We had a company roll up here with a truck full of computers."

Some companies like Furman Insurance opt for a business recovery service. They pay a monthly fee, ranging from around \$200 to \$1,250, and when business looks like it's heading for *force majeure*, they call for a portable office to be trucked in within 48 hours so they can keep operating.

"We've had 21 clients calling from Florida since Monday," said Bob Boyd, president of Agility Recovery Services of Charlotte, N.C. ``We're bringing them generators, satellite phones, whatever they need."

The phone's also ringing off the hook at K.L. Security Enterprises from such Floridians as Cheryl Young, administrative assistant at Polaris Connectors, a manufacturer of electrical wire connectors.

The company didn't suffer damage from Wilma, but reports of others' misfortune was enough to prompt Young to plunk down \$1,285 for a waterproof/fireproof safe.

"We've been through preparing for four hurricanes in the past 15 months, and we read a lot of articles about people not having emergency preparedness plans," she said.

At Coral Springs company CellAntenna, President Howard Melamed is dealing with requests for antennas and other products that improve cellphone reception when networks are congested and towers are knocked out. "We sell a lot to FEMA," he said. ``We'll get a lot of calls next week, that's what when we saw clients come in with Katrina."

Companies say that Hurricane Wilma has shown that backup systems have become an essential business expense.

"This is not a luxury," said Travis. `This is a requirement.'