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## Airboaters stalled by FEMA

The pilots stand ready to go help hurricane victims but have not been allowed to do so.

Nancy Imperiale  
Sentinel Staff Writer  
Posted September 2 2005

As a flooded New Orleans sinks further into despair, up to 500 Florida airboat pilots have volunteered to rescue Hurricane Katrina victims, transport relief workers and ferry supplies.

But they aren't being allowed in. And they're growing frustrated.

"We cannot get deployed to save our behinds," said Robert Dummett, state coordinator of the Florida Airboat Association. He said the pilots, who range from commercial airboat operators to weekend pleasure boaters, "are physically sick, watching the New Orleans coverage and knowing that the resources to help these poor people is sitting right in our driveways."

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On standby since Monday, the pilots -- many from Central Florida -- have spent thousands of their own dollars stocking their boats and swamp buggies with food, water, medical supplies and fuel.

But the Federal Emergency Management Agency will not authorize the airboaters to enter New Orleans. Without that permission, they would be subject to arrest and would not receive security and support services.

The airboat association has complained to several congressmen who have contacted the federal agency on their behalf.

"To me, 500 airboats seems a perfect solution to the chaos and difficulty getting people out of their flooded homes," said U.S. Rep Mark Foley, R-Palm Beach Gardens. "I'd love them to be able to go in and help, and that's what I've conveyed to FEMA."

A FEMA representative said citizen volunteers are not being allowed into New Orleans for one big reason: It's just not safe.

"I think it's understandable, particularly given the TV footage that the entire world is seeing, for folks who have a big heart to feel a little bit frustrated and want to help," said Frances Marine, Orlando's FEMA public-affairs director. "However, it's so important to be coordinated. Those areas are dangerous right now. There are health hazards and limited ways of getting in and out. . . . Right now, private citizens trying to go into those impacted areas are more hindrance than help."

That explanation doesn't sit well with one victim of Hurricane Andrew, who e-mailed the airboat association, demanding to know why they weren't in New Orleans.

"I lost my house with Andrew," said Merle Arostegui, 59, of Perrine. "I was one of those people sitting on what was left of my doorstep. Let me tell you: I could be [a victim] in New

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Am not donating right now until I make it through this hurricane season with my house in one piece. Will donate ONLY to ASPCA/Humane Society Why? Because animals didn't have any choices evacuation and are probably exhibiting far better behavior than the HUMANS over there.  
Submitted by: Nicole  
9:33 AM EDT, Sep 2, 2005

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Orleans right now, and I am so frustrated."


Meanwhile, airboat operators watch and wait.

"It's probably a 50-50 chance right now that we'll go," said James E. Brown, a 54-year-old Longwood man who heads a convoy of 14 local airboat pilots. "We're willing to go, we're able to go, but it's all up to FEMA."

However, chaos in the Big Easy is making boaters' family members nervous.

"The more that is shown on TV of the shootings and looting," Brown said, "the more loved ones are telling us: 'Don't go. You're not going.' "

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