Rebuilding after the April Storms

Local AERN offices ready to help in the recovery process

ABOVE: The town of Hackleburg, located in Marion County, lies in waste on April 28, the day after an F5 tornado ripped through the community of 1,500 people. Deaths totaled 18, and the county as a whole lost 25 lives. Almost 75 percent of the town’s structures were destroyed, but officials say rebuilding is well under way.

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AERN provides entrepreneurial tools and training to 17 rural  
Alabama counties, working in partnership with local agencies to  
provide entrepreneurs with research and business planning resources.  
Each partner agency is provided a toolkit of resources to encourage  
and assist potential and existing local entrepreneurs.

The package of resources includes business reference materials,  
business planning software, and computer technology. On-  
site training for agency partners, local economic specialists, and  
entrepreneurs are integral to the program.

AERN’s UA partners include the Office of the Provost,  
Culverhouse College of Commerce’s Center for Business  
and Economic Research, the Center for Community-Based  
Partnerships, and the Bruno Library.

Financial support for AERN has been provided by:

Alabama State Legislature, University of Alabama Provost’s Office,  
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our local partners.

http://aern.cba.ua.edu
Storm Hits 12 AERN Counties

Recovery is well under way in the 12 AERN counties hit by the April tornadoes, according to reports from the different counties. Although full recovery may take as long as five years, several places reported rebuilding at near the 50 percent mark.

Cities and counties absorbed a blast from Mother Nature like no other in history when tornadoes struck 27 Alabama counties in April 2011. Some counties were hit by more than one tornado and on more than one day.

The collective toll on life and property was astounding and recovery is far from complete, according to the sources who contributed to this report. This article attempts to gauge the impact on the state, with particular emphasis on the AERN counties and local businesses affected by the tornadoes.

The disasters prompted a visit to Alabama by President Barack Obama and several visits to the hard-hit areas by Governor Robert Bentley. Government officials estimate damages totaling $2 billion in Alabama and $10 billion to the nation as a whole.

According to the National Weather Service, the main days for the April tornadoes that hit the South were April 14–16 and April 25–28. Some 353 tornadoes struck during the latter dates, a national record for such a short period of time; 321 people were killed, making the outbreak the fourth deadliest in U.S. history. In terms of fatalities and damage, Alabama was the hardest hit, but Arkansas, Georgia, Mississippi, Tennessee, and Virginia also sustained fatalities and major damage.

In Alabama the boundaries of the following AERN counties were breached by at least one tornado: Bibb, Chambers, Choctaw, Dallas, Fayette, Greene, Marengo, Marion, Perry, Pickens, Sumter, and Tallapoosa. Other Alabama counties receiving tornado damage were Autauga, Blount, Calhoun, Cleburne, Cherokee, Chilton, Elmore, Franklin, Hale, Jefferson, Lamar, Marshall, Shelby, St. Clair, Talladega, Tuscaloosa, Walker, and Winston.
Here are brief reports of recovery efforts in the AERN counties:

**Bibb County**
AERN’s Bibb County representative Tracey Mitchell said a volunteer fire department lost two fire trucks and the Bibb County Career Academy in West Blocton suffered some damage but did not have to close. Eighteen Bibb County homes were destroyed or heavily damaged. The most damage in Bibb County occurred in Eoline, about seven miles from Centreville toward Tuscaloosa on Highway 82. The Red Cross and several church groups helped in the recovery process. One Bibb County resident was killed.

**Chambers and Tallapoosa Counties**
One person was killed in Dadeville, the hardest hit town in Tallapoosa County. Numerous homes and businesses were damaged and thousands of trees were uprooted or snapped. One source of recovery in Dadeville came from Alabama football player Courtney Upshaw, who set up a fund providing assistance to several cities affected by tornadoes. Marvin Wagoner, our partner in Alexander City, said his city was spared and that most of the Tallapoosa County damage occurred near Elmore County, where six residents died.

**Dallas and Sumter Counties**
Of the AERN counties hit, Dallas County escaped with the least damage, according to reports. An F1 tornado (about 90 mph) hit the Marion Junction area, destroying one house and damaging a mobile home. Trees were uprooted but no further damage and no injuries were reported.

It was a different story in Sumter County, where Geiger, a town of 250 people, was hit hard twice, once on April 15 and again on April 27. Dozens of businesses were devastated, every home was either destroyed or suffered significant physical damage, and hundreds of trees were uprooted or snapped. “People from Tuscaloosa, New Orleans, and Demopolis came to help,” said Allison Tucker, executive director of the Sumter County Chamber of Commerce.

**Fayette County**
Four people from two families died in Berry, where many houses were damaged or destroyed. The mother of AERN outreach coordinator Mary Patterson lived in this southern community of Fayette County. She lost her house, outbuildings and timber, but fortunately she was not home during the storm. Fayette, the largest city in the county, was spared.

**Greene County**
In Greene County, tornadoes hit the towns of Tishabee and Forkland twice, destroying trailers and houses, damaging others.
and leaving two churches in ruins. The storms also struck Mantua and Snoddy, destroying and damaging homes. Hodges Smith, deputy FEMA director for Greene County, said some 35 homes were destroyed and about half have been rebuilt.

**Marengo, Perry, and Choctaw Counties**

The National Weather Service said the F2 tornado that hit parts of Marengo, Perry, and Choctaw Counties caused injuries and major damage in the Faunsdale community. Jenn Tate in Demopolis said no businesses were damaged by the tornadoes but several homes in Faunsdale, Linden, and Demopolis suffered damage or were destroyed. The recovery assistance approach has been to conduct fundraisers and distribute the funds through churches because they have direct access to those most in need.

**Marion County**

The hardest hit county in terms of lives lost and damages per capita likely was Marion County, where 25 people were killed and hundreds of homes and other buildings were damaged or destroyed. The town of Hackleburg, where the Wrangler plant was leveled, lost 75 percent of the buildings within the city limits. Eighteen Hackleburg residents lost their lives. “Devastating” is how Hackleburg City Hall secretary Paula Baccus described damage to her hometown.

“Close to 200 homes were destroyed, along with a gas station, grocery store, about 20 other businesses, the police station, medical buildings, and churches. Both the elementary school and the high school were completely leveled.”

Baccus reported good progress in the seven months since the tornado, adding “There is more to come. City Hall is almost finished with just the little things to make it fully complete. The fire station plans on building and expanding to what they used to have.” She gave these additional updates:

- The town’s only gas station was rebuilt within three weeks.
- There is still no grocery store, forcing people to travel 10–15 miles to buy food and other necessities. “Restaurants have been busy,” Baccus said.
- A Dollar General will open in either February or March.
- Schools, a doctor’s office, and a pharmacy have been operating out of tractor-trailers and the police station has been operating out of City Hall.
- The Community Recreation Center has been made available for high school basketball practice.
- The Senior Citizen Center has reopened.
- The leveled Wrangler plant will reopen in April 2013 with 200 employees, up from 150 before the storm.

The Mennonite Christian Aid Ministry announced it will build 15 new houses for people who lost their homes, and Habitat for Humanity plans to build four. There is no charge for the Mennonite group’s labor; owners pay only for the materials.

David Thornell, president and CEO of Northwest Alabama Economic Development Alliance, said he was impressed with the spirit of the citizens of Hackleburg. He was especially glad to see the quick response by Wrangler to bring back a larger facility with more employees, which he said ensures the future of the town. As FEMA does not cover business losses, he urged businesses to check with their insurer. Some may have business interruption coverage.

Thornell said Governor Robert Bentley called the Hackleburg/Wrangler project the most meaningful he has been involved in since becoming governor.

**Pickens County**

The April 25–28 tornadoes did no damage in Pickens County, which had experienced a small tornado two weeks before, on April 11. The roof of the Pickens County Herald was blown off and hit the museum across the street, damaging plate glass windows and an awning.

The red lines in the map show tornado paths in Alabama on April 27. In the AERN counties, Marion had the greatest number of separate tornadoes, three, but several others had two. Sumter County suffered hits on both April 15 and April 27.
Road to Recovery
AERN co-director Paavo Hanninen’s house suffered significant damage, and when he talks about a “game plan” for recovery from disaster, he has firsthand experience.

“I’ve talked to a lot of people who closed their businesses that day without knowing a tornado was about to hit. They sent their employees home at 1:30 or 2 o’clock and probably saved a lot of lives,” he said.

Many communities are still rebuilding and AERN is available to help facilitate the process and continue to provide services throughout the state, Hanninen said.

“AERN stands ready to offer whatever business related assistance any business owner rebuilding after the tornadoes would need,” said Annette Watters, AERN co-director.

“No one wants to go through what our friends in the path of the tornado went through. As rebuilding takes place it’s a good time to think of ways to improve any aspect of a business from rethinking inventory, to upgrading a structure, to doing a better job. AERN resources and our local partners can help business owners as they rebuild.”

Of the 12 AERN counties hit by tornadoes, Marion County suffered the most damage. The tornado that hit the town of Hackleburg tracked U.S. Highway 43 and strengthened to an F5 at 210 miles per hour as its path widened to the size of 13 football fields, according to the National Weather Service.

Disaster Lessons
Hanninen suggested the following actions a business person should keep in mind during disasters:

• First and foremost, take care of your employees. Without them you can’t run your business. Worry about the physical losses later. People come first at all times, but especially in situations like the April 2011 tornadoes.
• Second, reach out to your customers and quickly let them know what you plan to do, where you plan to do it, and how fast you plan to do it. No customers means no sales, which means no cash, which means you’re out of business, compounding one disaster into several.
• Third, quickly determine your cash position by getting with your money people — insurer, accountant, banker, vendors.
• Fourth, take care of yourself because if you are not personally solid (rested, healthy, organized) you won’t be able to handle the first three.

How fast a business can recover depends on a number of things, but Hanninen had a sense that the supporting agencies at all levels (federal, state, and local) “did a solid job in the face of an overwhelming task.”

“The pace of recovery for the business sector will be directed by the need to resolve individual insurance issues and to reconcile the legacy business structures with the demands of the new business environment. I believe this will take some time,” Hanninen said.

2011 Super Outbreak: Quick Facts
• Largest number of tornados in briefest time
• Dates: April 25 – 28, 2011
• 353 storms (EF5s = 6; EF4s = 11)
• Main states: AL, AK, GA, MS, TN, and VA
• Main day: April 27, 207 tornadoes
• 321 deaths, fourth deadliest in history
• 239 deaths in Alabama
• U.S. property damage: $10+ billion
• Alabama property damage: $2 billion
• 27 counties in Alabama were damaged
• 12 are AERN counties
• Greatest damage among AERN counties: Marion County (75% of Hackleburg destroyed. 25 lives lost in county)
• Federal assistance to Alabamians: $82 million

Source: National Weather Service
As AERN begins its 11th year, Dr. Mike Hardin, dean of the Culverhouse College of Commerce & Business Administration, is looking for additional ways to keep AERN sustainable so that the same level of excellent service can continue throughout Alabama for years to come. He believes the primary method for keeping AERN sustainable is through acquiring research grants.

“AERN is a great opportunity to do research,” Hardin said. “With the number of communities involved we could answer big questions through community-based research.”

Hardin is quick to point out that community-based research projects conducted exclusively by universities can sometimes lead to negative perceptions about communities. The university may assume knowledge about a community and how best to solve its problems. Without the community’s involvement or insight, academic research has a tendency to stress the negative when, with trust and collaboration, UA and its community partner might come up with a more accurate picture.

AERN has avoided the pitfalls of what some call “parachute” research (a rescue-style research model in which the all-knowing university “parachutes” in to a community and then leaves with a disk full of out-of-context data). Instead, AERN prefers to build relationships and incorporate indigenous community knowledge into its research projects.

“Those relationships provide a richer context that builds trust,” Hardin said.

The service aspect of AERN is ongoing, he said. The University is not there to exploit but to establish relationships, built throughout the network, that do not happen overnight but develop over time, a model exactly the opposite of “parachute” research. Having established partnerships based on trust on all sides, Hardin thinks AERN is primed to tackle some big questions.

“We have something unique in the nation in AERN,” Hardin said. “We can answer questions about rural communities that no one else in this country can answer. AERN has a breadth of communities. We can draw statistical data on demographics, on economic well-being, and so on, all of which can provide a range that allows scientific rigor and lends validity to any study.”

Hardin is no stranger to research, having served as the associate dean for research in the business school since 2001, before being named dean of the college this past August. Prior to his UA appointments, he worked on hundreds of research grants at UAB over a period of 13 years.

“I know the importance of having multiple communities and what having a great sample size does for statistical-based research findings,” Hardin said. “There are a lot of questions out there, and AERN has the potential to answer them.”

Hardin is pushing that idea of research in collaboration with UAB and through ongoing discussions with Dr. John Higginbotham, associate dean for Research and Health Policy in the College of Community Health Sciences. Hardin believes research will be the primary method for funding AERN and sustaining the great services it provides to the network.

“AERN has always been pieced together on a shoe-string budget from grants and great support from the provost, but we have to look at making it more sustainable,” Hardin said. “If we can help create new jobs, and we have plenty of success stories that show AERN does help create jobs; if we can then back that up with statistical data and reports, we will be able to make AERN sustainable.”

While Hardin’s top priority for AERN is to keep it going and to begin addressing some big questions through research, he has no shortage of praise for the services AERN has provided since its inception, and especially the work of co-directors Annette Watters and Paavo Hanninen.

“Paavo and Annette’s hearts have always been in service, and they have a great understanding of how to interact with and work with communities,” Hardin said. “Paavo
AERN Co-Directors Look to Future

Research identifying the critical factors that make for business success and quality of life improvement in rural Alabama will be a key to funding AERN’s future.

Last year’s annual report focused on where AERN had been in its 10-year history. In this article co-directors Annette Watters and Paavo Hanninen look toward what the network will need to do to consolidate gains, increase value, and ensure a strong future.

The basic idea that gave birth to AERN was “the simple notion of placing business planning and research resources at the community level to help folks start new businesses,” Hanninen said.

“And,” Watters added, “these are the same resources that help them stay in business and improve their business.”

The long-term success of AERN can be directly attributed, Hanninen said, to the fact that “we have not strayed from our basic idea and have been consistent in our execution of it.”

“To summarize how we got to where we are today, we had a good idea, we kept our focus, and our execution was solid,” Hanninen said. “Coincidentally, those are the exact three things a person needs to succeed in starting a business. In other words, AERN has been much like the good small businesses that we work with.

Over the years, those three factors – good ideas, staying focused, and solid execution – have given AERN a remarkable track record in winning grant awards and funding, “though in the manner of most small business operations, definitely on an ad hoc basis,” Hanninen said.

These factors, and because small business is dear to the heart of most Alabama politicians, have helped AERN maintain a high ratio of awards to submissions.

But as grants from government allocation decline, AERN is looking to increase its presence in the community-based research market, Hanninen said, and the opportunities there are numerous.

“Our long record of interaction with rural economic development, rural small businesses and rural community banks, as well as other local professionals, puts us in a good position to acquire research funds to measure success as it applies to small, rural markets,” he said. “By working with our partners, we will come up with factors that predict success (and failure) for business creation, how those factors work in rural versus other settings, and how people come to the decision to start a business.”

Another significant area for small business establishment and growth, Hanninen said, is capital access/capital generation and how that works in rural versus other settings. “This is an important topic because the ability to access capital on a timely basis is critical to the entrepreneurial process,” Hanninen said, “and a sidebar is the role that nongovernmental organizations like chambers of commerce play.”

Another important area for research as it affects small business opportunity, Hanninen said, is how best to utilize evolving technology in rural settings.

When AERN started, much of rural Alabama was not connected to the Internet. “Now that has changed, and the Internet and other technologies are at the forefront of what entrepreneurs need assistance with in establishing and operating their businesses,” Hanninen said.

Financial support for AERN has been piecemeal, Hanninen said. Most of AERN’s support has come from a variety of federal sources, continuing UA support, and foundations, Watters said.

Hanninen agreed with Dean Hardin that having the network at its disposal to answer research questions of all kinds is a great advantage for AERN in seeking grant funds.

Hardin noted the value of having such a large sample base from which to answer questions about many areas of interest.

Using the community-partnered research model and the large AERN sample will enable the university and the community to conduct research that gives community organizations a central role in research, design, and execution. This will result in an accurate picture, one that may be able to identify the critical factors that make for business success and quality of life improvement in rural Alabama.
Patterson Sees Social Media Role Expanding

Increasingly, experts recommend that small businesses take advantage of social media to promote their company name and products. The most widely used social media are Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, and YouTube, and businesses should consider using at least a couple of them, experts say.

Mary Patterson, AERN outreach coordinator, sees great value of social networks as a marketing tool, and you surely can’t beat the price.

Q. What makes Facebook such a good resource for promoting a business?

Patterson: Networks composed of the people who live around you and do business in your area are extremely valuable to a business. They provide an avenue to target users of your products or services and are completely free. Social networks like Facebook and Twitter allow a business to build relationships, network, and get feedback, all of which are vital to business success.

Q. What are some of the benefits of using Facebook and other social networks?

Patterson: Facebook allows people to profile their businesses on a business page, thus creating awareness of their products or services and driving customers to them. It also allows a business to offer incentives for people to connect, such as coupons or contest drawings that can be administered through third party applications. Insights offered by Facebook give details about the users of your page so that you can target your product to your best customers. Facebook also allows a business to stream events or information that is beneficial to its customers, as well as post newsletters that its users enjoy reading.

Q. What are the negatives of social networks?

Patterson: The only negative in allowing feedback on Facebook is the potential for giving space to unfavorable comments about your products or services, but even that can be useful to fix problems and show a genuine customer-care response, which can benefit business in the long haul.

Q. What made AERN decide to use Facebook?

Patterson: We decided to design a Facebook page for AERN to create awareness about our outreach and promotion of small business. We use it to post useful information on economics, taxation, demographics, and other tips pertinent to small business. It also provides a way to connect with our partner agencies by announcing events being hosted by AERN or partner members.

Q. How would a reader access AERN on Facebook?

Patterson: Go to http://www.facebook.com/AERN.UA

Q. Who are some of the AERN partners taking advantage of social media?

Patterson: Washington County Public Library and Washington County Chamber of Commerce and Sumter County Chamber of Commerce are among the ones that are using social networks as are many of the businesses in their area that use the AERN resources.
Partners Meeting

The 2011 Annual Partners Meeting began on Flag Day, June 14, appropriately, with the Pledge of Allegiance in the Demopolis Higher Education Center. Jenn Tate, executive director of the Demopolis Area Chamber of Commerce, welcomed the partners to the meeting. Tate is in her second year as director of the chamber after having taught art and literature to high school students.

“I saw a chance to become more involved in Demopolis, where my two sons are in school and my husband is manager of an office branch of Motion Industries here in town,” Tate said. “I realize now more than ever the importance of personal involvement in a community.”

Annette Watters, AERN co-director, gave a presentation at the annual meeting comparing the rural counties in AERN to the rest of the country, and she looked at what factors contribute to a successful economic landscape.

“Economic diversity is what brings prosperity,” Watters said. “Local capitalism distributed among many types of groups yields better results than a heavy dependence on government employment or any one industry type.”

Watters also discussed how prosperity blossoms through education, including local school systems and universities. She pointed to some other predictors of prosperity for rural counties, such as a strong private sector, diverse kinds of businesses, a stable population, established social networks, supportive institutions, and a homogeneous population.

Patterson Joins AERN Staff

In the spring of 2011 Mary Patterson was introduced as AERN’s new outreach coordinator. At the annual meeting, she described the many ways that AERN works with local partners to bring the resources of the campus to the member counties. Patterson works primarily with the staffs of AERN partners, but also with groups and individual business owners at seminars and workshops sponsored through chambers of commerce, libraries, and economic development organizations throughout the network’s counties.

“With the downturn of the economy, I believe that entrepreneurs and small business owners will be the basis for economic growth and prosperity in the years to come,” Patterson said. “Our mission is to educate and support our AERN partner agencies so they can make a difference to their local business owners in their endeavors.”

Before coming to AERN, Patterson worked to support community leaders and business owners across Alabama through multiple volunteer efforts, working in public and corporate accounting, and owning her own business as an insurance agent and CPA firm.

“It was an easy transition to move to AERN after retiring from my own business. It feels like a natural extension of what I’ve always done,” she said.

Library Resources

Sandy Smith, executive director of the Monroeville/Monroe County Chamber of Commerce, gave examples of how she uses the popular “Ask a Librarian” resource as a tool to provide answers for her constituents.

“One of my constituents was able to use University of Alabama resources to find out how many south Alabama businesses are importers or exporters,” Smith said. That information led him to business decisions that increased his sales. “A key feature of AERN is to tap into UA for information and resources,” she said.

Business librarian Paul Brothers elaborated on the information available through the Bruno Business Library at the AERN centers. He was joined by fellow librarians Karen Chapman, Mark Sicilano, and Lee Pike, head of the Angelo Bruno Business Library.

Pike provides oversight for all operations in the library, works with various commercial databases for businesses, and acts as liaison between UA’s business school and the library administration.
“We communicate with the AERN team all the time and monitor activities, whether through the website, the newsletters, partner visits, and other undertakings,” Pike said. “We consider AERN activities to be mainstreamed into what we do at Bruno. AERN is a business service that we enjoy providing to the community.”

New Members

Two new partners joined the AERN network this year: Washington County and Sumter County. The Washington County AERN grand opening took place on February 17 in Chatom, the county seat, at the Washington County Public Library. Brooke Atchison, the executive director of the Washington County Chamber of Commerce, worked with AERN co-directors Annette Watters and Paavo Hanninen for a year prior to the grand opening.

Jessica Ross of the Washington County Public Library, was excited about the possibilities the new AERN partnership could bring to the community.

“Lots of times people who have lost their jobs are considering starting their own business, so that’s been a neat partnership,” Ross said. “We hope to able to continue to promote the center and send out more information as time goes on.”

Since the grand opening, Diane Waites’s desire to own a business has come true, in part because of the help of AERN. Dreamers, a new gift shop in Chatom, opened after Waites attended an AERN workshop at the Washington County Public Library and worked with Atchison.

“Ever since the workshop, I have been better able to take advantage of information about Washington County in terms of age groups and income,” Waites said. Knowing there were people there to help with the idea of taking out a loan was invaluable, she said. “Brooke is so helpful, and she has done a great job with advertising AERN resources at our library.”

Sumter County, an AERN partner a decade ago, returned to the network with a grand opening and ribbon cutting ceremony on July 26 in Livingston. Allison Tucker, the executive director of the Sumter County Alabama Chamber of Commerce, welcomed AERN as another way to engage the community.

“I want to make the local community aware of what the chamber can do for them and all the opportunities it presents. AERN is a natural extension of that, and I’m excited to move forward with them,” Tucker said.

“AERN thanks and commends all of its partners for another fantastic year in 2011, even in the face of tragedy,” Watters said.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Jobs Created and Saved with Help from AERN over the Past Six Years</th>
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<td>2008: 102</td>
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<td>2010: 182</td>
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Information provided by the local AERN partners.
That’s no cloud

It’s the F4 tornado just after it hit Paavo Hanninen’s neighborhood

Like many citizens throughout the state, Paavo found it impossible to make a complete list of all who helped him and his family:

“The list of folks who helped our family during the days and weeks and months following the storm is very long and we will never forget what was done on our behalf. However, a few names — all of them familiar to our AERN friends — need to be mentioned: Annette and John Watters, Mary and Ed Patterson, Tye and Emily Warren, and Adelaide Wood Drennen. They all provided critical help and support, and gave us names of potential subcontractors, when help was most needed during what can only be called an ‘apocalyptic’ event.”

The question some might ask: What in the world were Paavo and his wife Ashleigh doing outside just seconds after their neighborhood was ripped up by a tornado? Well, Paavo was running toward his neighbor’s crushed BMW that is not visible underneath the tree (top picture). Thankfully, nobody was in the car. The Hanninens’ Kia was not hit.