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THE NATION

The Land of 10,770 Empty FEMA Trailers

Far from the victims of Katrina for whom they are meant, the furnished shelters crowd an airport, benefiting only the town of Hope, Ark.

By Johanna Neuman, Times Staff Writer

At Uncle Henry's Smokehouse Bar B Que in Hope, Ark., the lunchtime crowd filled every table Thursday — all 10 of them. At City Hall, the phones were ringing off the hook. And out at the airport, a private pilot who just turned 45 said she didn't expect to live long enough to see things get back to normal.

All because of the latest example of how federal, state and local officials have responded to Hurricane Katrina. Time was, Hope was known primarily as the childhood home of President Clinton. Now it's Trailer Town, USA.

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After the Aug. 29 storm left thousands homeless on the Gulf Coast, officials in Louisiana, Mississippi and Alabama began calling for trailers to provide temporary shelter. More than 100,000 were requested, and somebody decided to create holding areas for the trailers outside

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Today, legions of wide-bodied mobile homes sit empty at Hope's Municipal Airport, a sprawling former military base. After all these months, storm victims can't seem to get the trailers, which are proving a mixed blessing to Hope and Arkansas.

"It just boggles the mind in this day and time," said Mark Keith, director of the Hope-Hempstead County Chamber of Commerce. "There are 10,770 trailers at Hope Airport. That's one for every man, woman and child in Hope, with a few left over to send to Emmet, down the road."

On the plus side, new jobs have been created for security guards, maintenance workers and others for trailers that cover all but one of the airport's runways and spill onto adjacent land. At Uncle Henry's, owner Bobby Redman says business is up by as much as 20%. The small army of truckers who deliver the trailers pump money into many parts of the local economy.

"It's been good for the whole town," said Mayor Dennis Ramsey. The Federal Emergency Management Agency picked Hope after searching the Internet for World War II-era military airports, he said.

State coffers also have benefited. Many truckers got tickets ranging from \$125 to \$425 each for not carrying the right permits or for getting stuck on the road after dark, said businessman Dennis Larson of Montevideo, Minn., whose company hauled nearly 400 of the trailers to Hope.

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"I have a dozen of the tickets sitting on my desk," he said. "The state of Arkansas set out to profit. It was by far the worst of all the states that we went through.... Missouri was the best. You talk to any trucker, you mention Arkansas and they shiver."

Locally, some people are upset that the trailers are not being moved to where they're needed. "It has employed quite a few people, but it's not about Hope," Mayor Ramsey said. "It's about folks in Louisiana, Mississippi and Alabama."

"All of us think it's not right for them to be sitting out there and not where families need them," said Janice Skipworth, general manager of the Super 8 Motel, which filled with Katrina evacuees after the storm. "I stand behind my government no matter what, but this is kind of wrong."

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City Bakery owner Randall Ross agreed. Months after the hurricane, "it's dang sure those people are in need now."

With the rainy season at hand, some local officials feared many units would sink into the mud. But FEMA plans to lay down a 290-acre bed of gravel for them to rest on, at a cost of \$6 million.

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Why haven't the trailers been sent to those who need them?

Rep. Mike Ross (D-Ark.), a graduate of Hope High School, asked that question as he toured the airport Thursday with FEMA officials. "It cost \$431 million and they're all sitting there, 75% of them literally parked in a cow pasture," Ross said in a telephone interview. "They are brand-new, all totally furnished, and yet people have been living in tents for five months in a row. It just makes you sick to your stomach."

FEMA says it has been stymied by federal regulations, such as one forbidding trailers to be positioned in flood plains — which rules out much of the area hit by Katrina — and by officials in Louisiana, where the need is greatest.

"It's amazing that every state in the union embraced Katrina evacuees except the folks in Louisiana," FEMA spokeswoman Nicol Andrews said.

After Katrina, FEMA ordered 135,000 trailers, most supplied by large national manufacturers and some acquired from local dealers, she said.

"We have a lot of trailers in the supply line. The challenge is where to place them," she said. Only eight of Louisiana's 64 parishes have welcomed them, she said. "You can't plug a trailer into a tree."

On Thursday, a rumor spread around town that FEMA was selling the trailers, \$1,000 for 10. City Clerk Carol Almond had to tell callers she had no information on that.

At the Hope airport, the trailers are beginning to sag. Some people believe the trailers are there to stay. Jeannette Collums, who just had that 45th birthday, said pilots have taken to asking controllers for permission to land at the "Hope Municipal Trailer Park."