

Mississippi's 11 casinos brace for Gustav

Jackson, Mississippi (AP) – Mississippi's 11 Gulf Coast casinos are preparing this Labor Day weekend for Tropical Storm Gustav, three years after Hurricane Katrina turned several of the massive casino barges and hotels into waterlogged heaps of rubble.

The 12 casinos operating along the coast on Aug. 29, 2005, were either flooded or carried away by Katrina's powerful winds and storm surge. It was several months before the first one reopened.

Now, some casino barges are placed inside special dams that help protect the structures from changing water conditions and adverse weather. But if another major storm hit, no one knows for sure if the protections would be enough.

The eye of Katrina pushed ashore near Waveland and Bay St. Louis, and destroyed thousands of homes and businesses along the state's 70-mile coastline. Weeks later, the state Legislature eliminated the requirement that gaming resorts be located on barges in the water. Casinos are now allowed to build a short distance on shore.

Despite the change, Chett Harrison, general manager of Boomtown Casino in Biloxi, said if Gustav gains strength over the warm coastal waters, it could have a big impact.

„We have obviously taken measures, but anytime you have that amount of rise in water anything can happen, even with the measures we have taken,“ Harrison said. „We will prepare ourselves the best we can.“

Boomtown spent USD 65 million to reopen its facility in 2006. Last year, the Gulf Coast Business Council, a corporate

executives' group, estimated that casino companies had spent USD 1.7 billion rebuilding along the coast.

They are a substantial economic force: In July alone, the Gulf Coast casinos took in USD 115.7 million. Mississippi also has casinos along the Mississippi River.

„Most of the casinos are now on land and they are built in the permanent structures that survived Katrina very well, so the impact is not going to be the same,“ said Janice Jones, a spokeswoman for the Mississippi Gulf Coast Convention & Visitors Bureau. „But we are hoping that it is going to go west or east.“

Gustav was predicted to strengthen to a Category 3 hurricane as it crosses the Gulf of Mexico and could make landfall anywhere from Florida to Texas. Mississippi Gov. Haley Barbour has issued a state of emergency because of the threat posed by the storm.

Jones said Gustav will delay a marketing campaign to lure tourists to the coast. Since Katrina, coast casinos have been affected by rising fuel prices, a weak economy and competition from Indian reservation casinos in Florida.

„We are doing a golf, gaming, and fishing package for the months of September and October,“ Jones said. „We were hoping to launch the campaign on Monday, but we are obviously ... going to wait and see what happens.“