

STORM-WARY BUSINESSES STOCK UP ON GENERATORS

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It's a couple of days after a hurricane and most of the danger has passed. Now the fight is against discomfort and misery.

There's no electricity yet, which means no hot meals, no gasoline, no cash from the ATM. And it's a day without air conditioning in the stifling Florida summer. Cell phone batteries are dying -- and it's hard to get a signal anyway.

One thing fixes most of the misery: electricity. Even if your house doesn't have power, it helps when there's electricity somewhere. Maybe a nearby restaurant or a store with cold bottled water; maybe even a bar with cold beer.

For all that government does to help people and get the basics done after a storm -- performing rescues, clearing roads, fixing red lights -- it's only when the businesses get going again that life begins to seem normal.

"You might not have your air, but you can go out and drive somewhere and get something to eat with the kids because they're going nuts," said Richard **Walker**, a West Palm Beach businessman.

After seeing the inconvenience faced by his community after two years of hurricanes, **Walker** started **Power To Go**, a company that provides mobile generators for businesses, primarily restaurants and gas stations.

"In 2004, we sold over 460 generators," **Walker** said. "In 2005, we sold over a thousand." This year he'll exceed that by the middle of hurricane season.

The power companies say they're better prepared to deal with hurricanes and moving to make their infrastructure sturdier, hoping to do their part to get things back on after a storm.

But many businesses won't be waiting for the utilities. Stung by being without power for more than two weeks after Hurricane Wilma, many are going to businesses like **Walker's** to make sure they can get back up and running quickly.

Some say they don't want to lose loyal customers. And, like many people after a disaster, they feel a certain kinship with their community. They want to be able to help.

"I've been in business for a long time in South Florida," said Max Alvarez of Miami, who owns about 50 gas stations around the region and who makes sure he's got enough generators to get them all running as soon as he can get gasoline after a hurricane.

The quicker he can start selling the gas, the better for everyone, Alvarez said, noting that he tries to make sure he can open so he can provide fuel for power company trucks, police cars and ambulances.

And generator power is becoming the norm at big retailers that have the items people need after a storm. Publix, for example, has a goal of having generators at about 400 of its stores this year. Home Depot has long had generators in all its Florida stores, said company vice president Bob Puzon.