

Lightning-strike fires prove costly for homeowners

By [Stephanie Allen](#)

Staff Writer

[contact the reporter](#)

JULY 6, 2015

At least four buildings across Central Florida have caught fire during the past two weeks — apparently from one of Mother Nature's most underrated threats: lightning.

It's an occurrence all too familiar in Florida, which leads the U.S. in lightning-strike deaths each year, according to the National Weather Service.

Last year alone lightning sparked at least 265 building fires and wildfires across Florida, according to the State Fire Marshal's Office.

Some of those were deadly, and in total, cost millions of dollars in damages, officials say.

"A lot of people forget about it because disasters such as tornadoes and hurricanes get more media coverage," said Kim Loehr, spokeswoman for the Lightning Protection Institute.

But it only takes one direct strike for a building to go up in flames, she said.

And that one strike can cost a business, or family, everything it has.

That was seen most recently Sunday when an 144-room hotel building at the Avanti Resort Orlando on International Drive caught fire from an apparent strike.

The fire started about 6 p.m. and spread through the fourth floor of the building, forcing evacuations of the resort's three other hotel buildings, officials said.

No one was injured, but much of the top floor of the building was destroyed as the roof collapsed and flames tore through almost the entire floor.

Orange County Fire Rescue crews were at the building all evening and through Monday checking for hot spots, while some guests on the lower floors pulled what they could from their rooms.

A post on Avanti Resort's Facebook page Monday afternoon said all affected guests were being assisted and accommodated, but the exact damage still wasn't known.

The State Fire Marshal's Office is investigating the exact cause, but officials said it appears to be from a lightning strike.

Agency spokeswoman Kayla Anderson confirmed Monday that a fire Friday night at Buena Vista Place Apartments, just north of Disney's Magic Kingdom, was caused by lightning.

That fire started about 8 p.m. when lightning struck the roof of one of the apartment buildings.

Firefighters were able contain the flames to the attic above four center apartments, which had minor damage, Anderson said. No one was injured, and the rest of the building had varying water damage.

Officials are also blaming lightning for a fire that tore through College Football Hall of Fame Coach Lou Holtz's Lake Nona mansion June 21, and for a fire at a mobile home in Marion County on June 25 that killed nine cats.

From 2010 to 2014, the State Fire Marshal's Office investigated more than 1,180 building and wildfires across Florida with lightning as a confirmed cause.

Seminole County ranked third in the state with 53 confirmed lightning-strike fires during that time frame, according to state data.

Duval and Palm Beach counties tied for first with 66, followed by Hillsborough with 60 confirmed lightning-strike fires.

Orange County tied with Miami-Dade for fourth in the state with 52 fires, according to the data.

Those fires, along with other lightning-caused damage, led to more than 10,000 insurance claims in Florida last year, according to the Insurance Information Institute, which tracks insurance data.

Much as with the number of lightning deaths and injuries, Florida ranks first in the country for the most lightning claims.

The estimated value of all those claims is nearly \$74 million, according to the insurance institute.

Loehr, who advocates for lightning-protection systems, said there's a way for home and business owners to possibly reduce that number and their risk for lightning damage.

It comes with a price tag of about \$2,500 to \$3,500 upfront, she said, but could protect against a much costlier fire disaster.

A lightning-protection system is essentially a way of grounding lightning's powerful electricity, she said. The systems can be installed during or after construction, in addition to the grounding already in place for everyday electrical use, and give lightning a safer route to the ground, she said.

Although not 100 percent foolproof, she said, a protection system reduces the chance of a damaging strike because it typically keeps the electricity away from building materials.

"It's kind of like a security system," she said. "You may never need it, but if you have it, it's going to be there to protect you."

Anderson said the State Fire Marshal's Office also recommends lightning rods and using surge protectors on all electronics.

Those protections won't eliminate the risk, though, she said.

"Lightning is too unpredictable, unfortunately," she said.

sallen@orlandosentinel.com or 407-420-5417