

LIGHTNING STRIKE KILLS ONE, INJURES 17 PEOPLE NEAR LAKELAND ON JULY 4

At 4:39 pm EDT a lightning strike hit a barn near 4215 Viola Road in Polk County Florida, located about 1 mile northwest of Winston, or 4 miles west-northwest of Lakeland. The latest reports indicate that at least one person died, and up to 28 other people were affected. A total of 17 were transported to nearby hospitals with various injuries. Preliminary reports also indicated that the group involved in this tragic incident was participating in several outdoor activities for the July 4th celebrations, including a picnic and a soccer game.

A boundary moved across Western Polk County between 4:00 pm and 5:00 pm EDT as the West Coast sea breeze pushed inland. At 4:39 pm EDT the core of the thunderstorms had actually already moved further to the south of the incident location as depicted by the radar data image in Figure 1.



Figure 1. National Weather Service Doppler Radar in Ruskin FL showing a single lightning strike at 4215 Viola Road near Lakeland FL. The strike was shown around 4:40 pm EDT.

However, at 4:40 pm EDT the same radar snapshot shows a lone lightning strike over the incident area, well away from the storm core (depicted in red and yellow colors) some 6 miles to the south.

This unfortunate incident is a strong reminder of why it is so important to be on the alert and react to nearby thunderstorm activity. When it comes to lightning safety, remember; there is NO such thing as a safe spot or technique that will protect you from lightning when in the open. Always seek shelter when thunderstorms are close enough for thunder to be heard. Wait at least 30 minutes after the last rumble was heard before going outside. In the U.S. more than 45 percent of all the fatalities attributed to lightning strikes happen while the victims were involved in sports and other outdoor recreational activities. Here is a portion from the NOAA NWS Lightning Awareness Guidelines which briefly describes how lightning bolts may sometimes appear to come out of nowhere while in the open:

Bolts from the Blue

There are times when a lightning flash can travel horizontally many miles away from the thunderstorm and then strike the ground. These types of lightning flashes are called "Bolts from the Blue" because they seem to come out of partly cloudy skies with no rain, or even with a clear blue sky. While blue sky may exist overhead (or in part of the sky overhead) a thunderstorm is always located 5 to 10 miles (and sometimes even farther) away. Although these flashes are rare, they have been known to cause fatalities.

For more information on how to protect yourself from deadly lightning, please visit the Outdoor Lightning Safety documentation at the following internet address:

<http://www.lightningsafety.noaa.gov/outdoors.htm>

Remember: lightning is deadly, and only you can protect yourself from becoming the next victim.

WHEN THUNDER ROARS, GO INDOORS!