How do you know?

Recently a third-grade class touring a natural history museum learned more than just history. A scientist was explaining a fossil dig when a chipper little girl asked, “How old is that fossil?” “Six billion years old,” knowingly replied the scientist. “How do you know that?” questioned the girl. “Well, I’m a scientist,” explained the paleontologist. The little girl pressed on: “But how do you know?” “I have instruments that measure age.” “How do you know they’re right?” “The manufacturer said so.” “How do you know the manufacturer is right?” The girl and the guide went back and forth for several minutes like this before the scientist finally exclaimed, “Look, I don’t know! Okay? I just work here!”

Some things are easier to know than others. Florida is well known for its hurricanes. Indeed five of the seven most intense hurricanes to ever hit the United States landed on Florida, according to the National Hurricane Center. What is less widely known is that Florida has the best experts on dealing with storm preparation and recovery.

Consider the following: National Grid, a leading international electric utility, partners with Florida Power & Light on storm recovery specifically to learn how FPL does it, and Con Edison of New York asked FPL for training in hurricane preparation and recovery. Progress Energy’s and TECO’s hurricane recovery preparations and response will be showcased at the Edison Electric Institute’s annual convention. Southern Company was recently featured at a conference on emergency preparedness. Some utility regulators in the northeast ask their utilities to partner with Florida electric companies in storm recovery efforts so that their utilities can learn from Florida.

Florida’s electric utilities didn’t rise to this level of prominence through idleness and luck, but rather through hard work, preparation, and innovation. Florida’s electric utilities and the Florida Public Service Commission continue to look for ways to improve upon their performance. As part of this effort, the utilities are working with PURC to coordinate information sharing and cutting edge research on how Florida can harden its electric infrastructure to better withstand and recover from hurricanes. This effort serves two purposes. First, it helps ensure Florida’s utilities remain at the forefront of disaster preparation and recovery methods that serve customers reliably and cost-effectively. To this end, the utilities’ managers and some of the nation’s top academic researchers met at the University of Florida in early June to learn from each other and to brainstorm on solutions to outstanding problems. Second, such a public effort provides transparency, showing the public and government officials that the state’s utilities continue to push the envelope.

The importance of being an acknowledged leader should not be diminished or ignored. Knowing Florida’s utilities and government officials are respected by their peers should provide customers with the confidence that preparations and restoration priorities have been considered with the utmost due diligence. When mistakes appear – whether real or imagined – second-guessing and armchair-quarterbacking are less frequent and have less validity.
As the third graders learned, sometimes knowledge is hard to get, but constantly seeking to learn more is worth the effort.