

The Benefits of Mutual Aid for Water Utilities

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The massive flooding that occurred this summer along the Susquehanna, Delaware, and Mohawk Rivers served as a strong reminder of the importance of emergency preparedness for water systems. The New York Rural Water Association (NYRWA), the New York State Department of Health (NYSDOH), the United States Environmental Protection Agency (USEPA), and the American Water Works Association (AWWA) are some organizations that provide assistance and guidance for water systems that wish to enhance their emergency readiness. Recently these organizations have increased their focus on one particular emergency preparedness action that may be overlooked by water systems: the establishment of mutual aid agreements with neighboring systems.

Mutual aid agreements allow neighboring municipalities to assist each other during emergencies with personnel, equipment, and other resources while avoiding administrative and legal complications. Under formal mutual aid agreements, public works employees and emergency responders may participate in response activities outside the limits of their jurisdiction without loss of health insurance coverage, regular and overtime pay, and other benefits that they would normally be entitled to while working within their own system boundaries. Many municipalities in New York State have already established some form of a mutual aid agreement, however, most apply to fire department personnel and equipment, and often do not include the water department.

Maintaining a clean, safe drinking water supply is critical for any community, even during an emergency or disaster. Many small public drinking water systems in New York consist of only a few employees that may become overwhelmed in an emergency, working non-stop for many hours or even days. Mutual aid agreements permit water personnel from nearby systems to supplement the staff of the affected system so that demands on employees are more reasonable and all individuals involved can work more effectively. Similarly, systems participating in mutual aid agreements with the impacted system may contribute parts and equipment needed to continue water operations or repair structural damage. This drastically reduces the time it takes for emergency resources to arrive on the scene. Equipment from a neighboring municipality requires minimal transport time, whereas county and state resources may be delayed significantly due to the distance that they must be transported. For example, resources from the New York State Emergency Management Office (SEMO) must be picked up by the party in need. When personnel are already overwhelmed, it may be difficult to designate a vehicle and

crew to pick up the SEMO equipment. It may also take a significant amount of time to travel to the SEMO stockpile, obtain the equipment, and return to the site of the emergency. In some areas of the state, the drive-time to the nearest SEMO stockpile is several hours each way. In addition, the equipment has limited availability, as SEMO serves the entire state and other water systems may be experiencing emergencies at the same time.

When considering the above issues: health insurance coverage, payment for hours worked during the emergency response, relief for the affected system in the form of manpower and equipment, and freedom from administrative and bureaucratic complications, the benefits of mutual aid agreements are clear. For more information on mutual aid agreements, including how to develop your own agreement, visit the following websites or contact NYRWA or NYSDOH.

1. AWWA's White Paper on Mutual Aid:
http://www.a_Hlt141602967w_Hlt141602967wa.org/Advocacy/govtaff/
2. New York State Municipal Law pertaining to mutual aid:
 - New York Consolidated Laws – General Municipal Law, Article 6, Section 120-U
 - <http://public.leginfo.state.ny.us/frmload.cgi?MENU-26650964>

(From this website, click on the following links: Laws of New York GMU General Municipal Article 6 120-U) ♪

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for the
**New York Rural
Water Association
28th Annual
Technical Conference**
at the
Saratoga Springs City Center