



EMERGENCY PREPAREDNESS

Jim Bower | Wastewater Trainer/Technician

While at the National Rural Water Conference in New Orleans, I had the opportunity to attend a session on emergency preparedness entitled “The First 24 Hours: Bringing Order to Chaos.” I mean, think about it, who is better qualified to speak about emergency preparedness than the people of New Orleans?

Hopefully, none of the communities in New York ever experience anything close to what happened to the people of New Orleans, but let us hope that we can learn from their unfortunate experiences. Certainly parts of New York State deal with flooding, and most of us have dealt with high winds. But we here in New York also deal with the winter emergencies such as ice storms and blizzards, and just plain sub-zero temperatures. We are no strangers to emergency preparedness, but we have never dealt with a Katrina either.

The theme of this presentation was the first twenty-four hours and how crucial the hours immediately after an emergency are to successfully handling what you might face.

Many operators in small communities are forced to “fly solo” when emergencies strike, which can be a disaster in itself. However if you are fortunate enough to have emergency assistance such as mutual aid, make sure they are trained or at least familiar with your facility. Some volunteers with good intentions can also be of great help but can be dangerous to themselves and to your facility if they blindly start taking matters into their own hands.

A very good point that was brought up is whether you have the authority to make “on the spot” decisions, or do you have to wait for “the powers that be?” Speaking of those powers, who keeps them informed in an emergency? If you are a one-man operation, the answer is obvious, but in larger communities a “point man” to keep the necessary people informed should be part of your plan.

Here is a point that might keep you awake at night: with everyone having the obligatory cell phone, some of us no longer bother to put radios in the vehicles we drive. How are you to communicate if you don’t have cell phone service? You know that when you’re up to your knees in “whatever”, is when you’re most likely to drop your cell phone anyway, so backup methods of communication should certainly be part of your plan.

One more point that I found significant was that your

emergency plan must document your policies, including your emergency overtime pay policy if you hope to recover these expenses. The point being made is to document, document, and document! And save your receipts.

These are just a few of the highlights of the session that I thought I’d share with you as a reminder to get out your emergency preparedness plan and update it. These plans are “living documents” and require maintaining and updating. And remember, your initial assessment in the first 24 hours will help structure disaster recovery in the ensuing hours, days or weeks. Have you looked at your plan lately? Do you know where it is? 💧💧💧