

Utilities Helping Utilities

By Scott Berry, Circuit Rider

Over the past decade, the utilities located in Oregon have seen an increase in the number and severity both natural and human caused disasters. These disasters have caused widespread outages and interruption of services. Weather events are the usual culprit but there is a real need to address the threat of other natural occurrences such as earthquakes and wildfires. This article will focus not only on addressing those issues but will also take a look at mitigating the more localized occurrences. “Utilities Helping Utilities” is a concept dedicated to enhancing water and wastewater resiliency in response to disasters in the in the response and recovery phases and is taking steps to encourage utilities and local/state governments to establish intrastate mutual aid and assistance networks. The purpose of these networks is to provide a method whereby water/wastewater utilities that have sustained damages from natural or man-made events could obtain emergency assistance in the form of personnel, equipment, materials, and other associated services as necessary, from other water/wastewater utilities. The objective is to provide rapid, short term deployment of emergency services to restore the critical operations of the affected water/wastewater utility.

This peer-to-peer approach to incident response and recovery is the most effective way for a utility to quickly return to normal operations after an event has occurred. The reason for this is that no matter how good a contractor or other outside party may be, there is no substitute for someone within the industry. The individual components of your water/wastewater system may not be the same as the neighboring system but the technical operations from one the basic concepts, language, standards, regulations, personnel skills, and certification are relatively consistent. Another factor for managers to consider is the impact on their employees and their families. A mutual aid agreement would allow a utility to access the technical experience and expertise of similar utilities in the area and give some much needed time for employees to see to the needs of their families.

A signed mutual aid and assistance agreement does not obligate a utility to provide or receive aid but

provides a tool for use should events dictate a need. Having an agreement in place prior to an emergency can also enhance planning and prioritization by agencies responding to requests for help. Among many basic benefits of having or participating in a mutual aid and assistance network, key benefits include:

- Increased planning and coordination. Agreements facilitate and complement local and regional joint planning for incident response, and such agreements meet federal grant requirements. The networking prior to an emergency helps utilities identify the people involved.
- Enhanced access to specialized resources. The basic function of the agreement is to quickly bring specialized utility resources to bear when and where they are needed. Agreements ensure the timely arrival of vital water and wastewater equipment and personnel with the support of the appropriate authorities.
- Expedited arrival of aid. The federal and state government resources cannot address utility needs immediately. Mutual aid agreements streamline procedural steps so that resources can be easily requested and arrive in a timely manner.
- Reduced administrative conflict. Agreements clarify liability, reimbursement, and other administrative matters that could impede response in the absence of an agreement.
- Increased hope. As noted in past after-action reports from many disasters, after suffering loss of all critical infrastructures, the restoration of water and wastewater service provides a sense of comfort and hope that a “return to normal” is not far away. Utilizing local resources will also help you keep control of your water system and minimize conflict during a crisis.

One question that I am frequently asked in my travels around the state visiting with water systems is: When is it appropriate to request assistance from the state? When is the National Guard available to provide items such as generators, trucks for hauling water, etc?

The answer to that is that the state cannot become involved logistically until they are requested to do so by the county or other local authority. That request can’t come until all local resources have been utilized.

There are many issues involved in a mutual aid agreement and they should be carefully considered and put on paper before an incident occurs.

For more information on Mutual Aid Agreements and ORWARN, refer to their website at www.orwarn.org.