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# NEWSLETTER FOR MUNICIPAL EMA'S

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Columbia County EMA

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## OCTOBER 2010 FULL SCALE NUCLEAR POWER PLANT DRILL

Federal evaluators were back in our region the first full week of October for the biennial Susquehanna Steam Electric Station full scale nuclear power plant drill. This exercise gives us the opportunity to test emergency plans, while demonstrating to FEMA that we can adequately protect the public in the event of a radiological emergency at the plant.

This exercise is a monumental undertaking as it involves hundreds of people from state agencies, Columbia, Luzerne, Lackawanna, Lycoming, Montour, Northumberland, Schuylkill, Union and Wyoming County EMA's as well as twenty seven Municipal EMA's, eight School Districts, three Vocational-Technical High Schools, several volunteer radiological response teams and various police and fire departments.

I am pleased to report that the preliminary findings from FEMA indicate all Columbia County agencies performed admirably and no serious deficiencies which would adversely affect public safety were observed. As with any very large exercise there was a couple minor issues noted that can be easily rectified with training and plan revisions.

A tip of the hat and a big thank you goes out to everyone who participated and helped make the "2010 Drill" a success.

## HAZARDOUS MATERIALS EMERGENCY RESPONSE

Columbia County has signed a hazardous materials emergency response contract with EPS of Vermont, formerly known as TEEM Environmental. TEEM was always a respected player regionally however now they're part of a national organization and we're very pleased to be affiliated with them.

Pennsylvania law requires counties to have a "certified" hazardous materials response team or a contract in place with a PEMA approved private contractor. The law also specifies who can activate a hazardous materials team to act on behalf of the county. In Columbia the Commissioner's have delegated that authority to the County EMA Coordinator or approved designee.

The principle reason for a "certified" hazardous materials response is to mitigate chemical leaks and spills which threaten the health and safety of people or can cause significant damage to the environment. Generally speaking petroleum spills caused by motor vehicle accidents or incidents involving home heating systems are not considered hazardous materials emergency responses requiring a "certified" team.

For more information on hazardous materials laws, policies and procedures visit the Columbia County EMA web site at [www.columbiacountyema.org](http://www.columbiacountyema.org)

## DISASTER DECLARATION PROCESS

Fortunately, we have not had a major county-wide disaster since the flood of 2006. So it's not a bad idea to revisit the disaster declaration process. Please be advised that the issuance of disaster declarations are not restricted to major disasters. They can also apply to an event that overwhelms just one municipality.

It would be a mistake for anyone to think that enacting a disaster declaration automatically passes full responsibility on to the next level of government or assures FEMA funding will be forthcoming. That's not to say the possibility of help or that federal financial assistance is totally out of the question either.

Local elected officials should enact a disaster declaration when an emergency has occurred or is imminent, which could exceed their jurisdiction's ability to handle with available assets. The declaration also alerts the general public as well as the next level of government of the severity of the situation so they can make emergency preparations.

Disaster declarations last seven days unless renewed. They activate the municipality's emergency operations plan and assign duties to the local EMA coordinator. Disaster declarations also address certain legal issues such as: hiring workers, buying supplies and entering into contracts in order to effectively deal with the emergency without adhering to formal bidding requirements.

A county disaster declaration broadens the scope of the emergency by acknowledging the possibility that the situation will likely involve every municipality and exceed their combined capability to handle. The same goes for the state if it's expected a significant number of counties will be overwhelmed. The Governor will enact

a state disaster declaration. A state disaster declaration activates the state emergency operations plan and could direct state assets to assist local disaster response and recovery efforts.

A state disaster declaration will always precede the Governor sending a letter to FEMA requesting a Presidential Disaster Declaration. A preliminary damage assessment at the local level is usually required before this letter is sent unless the disaster is obviously a catastrophic event.

Usually for the President to sign a disaster declaration, state and local resources must be fully engaged in response and recovery efforts. If the President signs the declaration an array of federal programs could become available. However it must be noted that not every program is available for every disaster. The following is a brief overview of the programs that may become available.

- Individual Assistance provides aid to individuals and households. Programs may include: temporary housing, emergency home repairs, legal services, special tax considerations, crises counseling and disaster related unemployment assistance.
- Public Assistance provides aid to repair or replace public facilities damaged during the disaster. Programs may include: debris removal, reimbursing extraordinary emergency response costs, roads and bridges, water control facilities, public buildings and contents, public utilities, public parks and recreational facilities.
- Small Business Administration (SBA) Assistance provides low interest loans to qualified homeowners, renters and business owners. Loans are the primary

source of federal financial assistance.

- Hazard Mitigation Assistance provides (competitive) grant money for projects designed to reduce future losses.

Federal disaster assistance is just that, assistance. It's not insurance and should not be relied on as such. There's also a very rigid criteria to meet before states, counties, municipalities and individuals can become eligible for financial aid from FEMA. "Municipal Damage Reporting" is the mechanism which will ultimately determine that eligibility.

### **DAMAGE REPORTING**

Damage assistance is both personal and bureaucratic in nature. At ground zero the situation is traumatic and personal to victims, however when municipal, county, state and federal government agencies become involved things turn analytical and businesslike very fast. The reason of course is laws, policies and procedures must be followed. Financial assistance almost exclusively comes from the federal government. For a request to be approved the damage must be substantial and victim eligibility has to be established.

Damage reporting always starts at the municipal level. The process works best when the municipal response is operating under the emergency management umbrella. Damage reports can be compiled from a variety of local sources, reviewed, consolidated and forwarded to the county by the local EMA Coordinator. If the local EMA Coordinator is left out of the loop information comes into the county from various local sources and it often is incomplete, inaccurate or redundant. This slows down the process as the county must send reports back to the municipality for clarification.

Generally speaking municipal damage reporting is a two phase process. The first is referred to as Initial Damage Reporting. This is a quick down and dirty snapshot of the emergency and is taken during and updated immediately at the conclusion of emergency operations. The report is meant to be an overview and includes statistical information.

- # Killed
- # Injured
- # Evacuated
- # Shelters open and where
- # Homes damaged and the severity
- # Business damaged and the severity
- # Roads damaged and the severity
- # Bridges damaged and the severity
- # Public buildings damaged and the severity
- # Public utilities damaged and the severity
- # Public parks damaged and the severity

The second phase of municipal damage reporting is referred to as the Preliminary Damage Assessment (PDA). This should be one of the first tasks addressed after the municipality makes the transition from the response to the recovery phase of the operation. During the PDA more information is required about the damage previously reported. This includes names, addresses, phone numbers, insurance, estimates of value, and estimates of damage. A professional evaluation is not required during this phase however over-inflating the figures will not help the cause.

Municipalities can download damage assessment forms from the Columbia County EMA web site located at [www.columbiacountyema.org](http://www.columbiacountyema.org)

## **QUALIFICATION CRITERIA FOR FEMA DISASTER ASSISTANCE**

So what does it take to receive FEMA disaster assistance? Number one, the President must approve and sign a disaster declaration, and the state, county and the individual claimant must qualify.

Currently for the state of Pennsylvania to qualify for a Presidential disaster declaration there must be at least 16 million dollars worth of verifiable disaster related damage statewide. For Columbia County to qualify there must be close to a quarter million dollars worth of verifiable disaster damage. If the County qualifies then its municipalities also qualify. In order for the individual to qualify their home must be their primary residence and losses are uninsured or underinsured. All of the above criteria must be met and be advised the damage figures are subject to change.

Damage verification and appraisals are performed by FEMA inspectors. These inspections often go smoothly when the municipal damage assessment figures submitted during the PDA are found to be reasonable and in the ballpark. If municipal damage figures are found to be grossly over inflated then damage in that municipality must be closely scrutinized by federal inspectors.

## **QUALIFICATION CRITERIA FOR S.B.A. DISASTER ASSISTANCE**

The criteria to qualify for a Small Business Administration (SBA) disaster declaration are not as rigid as the requirements for FEMA aid. First of all a Presidential disaster declaration is not necessary, secondly the damage doesn't have to be nearly as extensive. SBA assistance comes in the form of low interest loans.

For an incident to qualify for a SBA disaster declaration there must be at least 25 damaged structures including homes, apartments and businesses and each must have an uninsured loss equivalent to at least 40% of the total value of the structure damaged. In cases when at least 5 small businesses have suffered significant, uninsured and verifiable disaster related losses and no other viable options are available the Governor may request SBA assistance be made available in the form of a SBA Economic Injury Declaration.

For a victim to qualify for assistance the incident must first qualify. When that criteria has been met qualified applicants for SBA loans must have reasonably good credit and the ability to repay the loan. Persons eligible to apply for SBA loans include disaster victims who are homeowners, renters or business owners who suffered substantial uninsured losses. Government entities, farms, owners of vacation homes and recreational vehicles are not eligible to apply.

Be advised during severe storms the above criteria can be met by the county by combining damage assessment reports from several municipalities. Of course if damage is never reported by the municipality to the county than an opportunity to help victims may be missed.

