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# NEWSLETTER FOR MUNICIPAL EMA'S

WINTER EDITION 2009-10

Columbia County EMA

December 2009

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## WINTER EMERGENCIES

As a rule winter weather begins in Columbia County soon after Thanksgiving and lasts until Easter. It's important to remain mindful of this because a routine incident any other time of the year could become a life threatening event when the weather is cold. This includes but isn't limited to stranded motorists, lost persons, prolonged utility outages, fires or a nasty storm that isolates the entire region.

## BASIC PREPAREDNESS

Having a Public Safety System in place capable of responding during extreme winter weather conditions is the responsibility of local elected officials. Naturally these officials count on cooperation from their EMA, Public Works, Police, Fire and Ambulance Departments. **This cooperation must not be assumed.** It's important to have plans in place and an ongoing dialogue established before during and after an emergency.

Every municipality must have an Emergency Operations Center (EOC). The EOC should have an auxiliary heat and power source as well as access to a telephone and fax machine. The Municipal Emergency Operations Plan (EOP), the Notification and Resource Manual, a local map and an adequate supply of stationary must be made available at each EOC. EMA

personnel and elected officials staffing an EOC must be prepared to provide emergency responders with resource support from the community to the extent necessary to get the job done. This supplemental support may come in the form of vehicles, equipment, supplies or personnel. The local EMA system must also be prepared to respond to public requests for information and services.

## SEVERE WINTER WEATHER WATCH OR WARNING

A winter storm "**Watch**" is issued by the National Weather Service when harsh weather is expected in a day or two. A "**Warning**" is posted when heavy snow or ice accumulation is imminent anytime within the next 24 hours.

A "**Watch**" means it's time for each municipality to check and make sure they're prepared to respond to a severe winter weather emergency.

- Vehicles should be equipped with emergency supplies and their fuel tanks filled to capacity.
- Snowplows, chains and rock salt should be ready for mounting and loading.
- It's also time to ascertain if enough EMA, police, fire, ambulance and

public works personnel will be available to provide essential services during the storm.

If a municipality reacts when a “Watch” is issued there’s a good chance there’ll be enough time to identify and correct any problems or deficiencies encountered. When a “Warning” is posted it’s time for mobilization not checking equipment.

### **EMERGENCY NOTIFICATIONS**

With weather information available 24 hours a day there’s really no excuse for anyone to be surprised and caught unprepared for a severe winter storm. The problem isn’t the absence of essential information it’s what’s not being done once the information is issued by the National Weather Service. Does your municipality just assume every department is informed and ready to go, or is someone actually assigned to make sure? **The latter is highly recommended!**

Columbia County EMA/911 will make an effort to ensure municipalities are aware of a potential or looming storm by broadcasting severe weather “Watches” and “Warnings” over public safety radio frequencies and sending pages to municipal Emergency Management Coordinators (EMC). County EMA will soon have the capability to send automated telephone messages alerting elected officials. The purpose of these redundancies isn’t to notify a few dozen individuals about a storm so they can replenish their home supplies; it is to set their municipal severe weather emergency response system in motion.

If you’re an elected official, EMC, Road Master or the chief of a public safety department and your municipality doesn’t have a firm or clearly understood winter weather emergency response policy in

affect please take the initiative to call the principle players together to discuss it.

### **ICE JAMS**

Ice jams are caused when ice on a body of water begins to break apart and flow down stream. It can jam at bridges, on debris or accumulate at bends and narrow points in the stream channel. An ice jam can create a dam causing water to pool or backup. It may also divert the flow of water outside the stream channel.

Columbia County EMA will notify affected municipalities if we become aware of an ice jam so the necessary notifications can be made to protect life and minimize property damage. Columbia County EMA will never request or recommend a municipality attempt to break apart an ice jam as this could eliminate one problem only to cause another downstream.

### **MISCELLANEOUS INFORMATION**

If a municipality opens a shelter without Red Cross pre-approval they assume full responsibility for its operation including the cost.

The Red Cross does not provide shelter to persons who run out of home heating fuel.

The 911 Center is not the dispatch center for snow plows. Penn Dot or the appropriate municipality should be contacted directly. Penn Dot can be reached at 387-4250.

Municipalities should keep good records during winter storms in the unlikely chance that federal or state funds were to become available for snow removal.

Now is a good time for municipalities to check the accuracy of their snow mobile & 4WD contact lists.