

Pacific County communications have improved since 2007 storm



DAMIAN MULINIX PHOTOS

Above: A resident walks through the backyard of his Seaview home after a large tree snapped in his backyard and another was blown over across the front of his house the night before. Right: Sid's market produce manager Darrin Hocking, left, helps toss spoiled food items into the dumpster behind the store.

Technology upgraded, more employees trained

By NATALIE ST. JOHN
Chinook Observer

LONG BEACH, Wash. — When the storm hit in 2007, Scott McDougall was working as a Raymond firefighter. He vividly remembers how noise in the fire station parking lot made him look out the window.

A large piece of sheet metal was wrapped around his truck. He wanted to go out and remove it, but a second glance stopped him in his tracks.

"There was a piece of sheet metal from the same roof that was flying through the air like an airplane wing," McDougall said. "I made a decision that the other piece of metal could stay wrapped around my truck."

McDougall joined the Pacific County Emergency Management Agency in 2013, and became the county's emergency manager when his former boss, Stephanie Fritts, retired late last year.

In 2008, county leaders held public meetings to discuss the storm response. With widespread phone and power outages, and many impassable roads, Pacific County's small communities were even more isolated than usual during the storm. Emergency responders said they struggled with unreliable radios, problems with the 911 system, and difficulty coordinating with relief agencies outside the area.

Residents said they were frustrated with slow responses to low-priority requests for aid and the lack of information coming from the overwhelmed agencies.

County leaders decided to upgrade communications technology and develop a better plan for public outreach.

"One of the biggest things that came out of the storm were some of the improvements to the communications system," McDougall said.

They also recognized the need for a dedicated Emergency Operations Center



Navigating 227th Street near Ocean Park was particularly difficult, as almost 20 trees fell onto the road, cutting off access in many sections.



Judy Smith and Dale Funkhouser talk about getting food and supplies to people without power in Ocean Park. The two were part of a small team of Red Cross workers who were stationed out of the LDS church in Long Beach following the storm.

— a sort of pop-up agency tasked with tracking the "big picture" during natural disasters.

Operations centers coordinate response and relief efforts, disseminate information to the public, and make sure response agencies have the resources they need to do their jobs, McDougall said. Their work is guided by the principles of the Incident

Command System, a protocol designed to help responders from different agencies work together smoothly when major incidents occur.

In 2007, staff pulled from other county departments set up a temporary operations center. They had to do a lot of on-the-job learning in less-than-ideal conditions.

"We didn't have people trained to the

level we would like to have them trained," McDougall said. "Stephanie ended up wearing a lot of hats."

Now, there is a permanent operations center in South Bend. McDougall can quickly set another one up in the county annex in Long Beach. There are more people who can help in the center, and they have more training now, McDougall said. County staff periodically run practice drills to prepare for real emergencies.

One of the biggest lessons of the 2007 storm was that when people don't have good information "they fill the vacuum with wild speculation, rumor and their worst fears," McDougall said. So, Fritts and McDougall have also developed strategies for communicating with the public in times of crisis.

The county has upgraded critical phone, computer and emergency dispatch infrastructure to make it more reliable. People who are in distress can now text 911, and new GPS technology makes it easier for dispatchers to locate callers.

However, Fritts and McDougall also wanted a tried-and-true way to communicate when newer technologies fail, so they enlisted the help of amateur ham radio operators.

Operations Center staff in South Bend can now use ham radio to contact fire departments all over the county. They can also send messages from the ham radio system to email accounts, which is helpful for coordinating with agencies outside of the affected region.

But McDougall isn't counting on email. Even in the worst conditions, he said, pens and paper still work.

If all else fails, fire station personnel can transcribe ham radio transmissions, and post the information on community bulletin boards.

"I think that will allow for much better dissemination of information," McDougall said.

STORM FACTS:

Gale's top reported gust was 147 mph at Radar Ridge, an ocean-facing mountaintop in Washington.



Remembering the 2007 Storm

& how to be prepared next time

During the 2007 storm and in the days following, all PUD customers experienced some type of disruption to their service at one time or another. All PUD employees that could provide assistance in restoring service were dispatched and worked numerous hours in inclement weather putting the system back together. Due to the extent of the damage, crews were brought in from Clark, Clallam, Cowlitz, Lewis and Wahkiakum PUDs to help with repairs to the transmission and distribution system. Each of the Bonneville Power Administration's three main transmission lines bringing power to the county were damaged. Many agencies, local businesses and individuals provided help, food, drinks, and encouragement to those assisting in the restoration process. PUD #2 of Pacific County is grateful for the help, support and patience of the residents of Pacific County and the surrounding area.



Here are tips for helping you get through your next severe storm:

- Stay away from downed power lines!
- A family preparedness kit should be ready with water, food, first aid supplies, clothing and any special items for medical conditions
- Keep refrigerators and freezers closed; they can keep food safe up to 3 days if not opened
- Other items to have on hand:**
- A flashlight and extra batteries; candles and matches.
- A telephone connected directly to the jack;
- cordless phones rely on electricity
- Properly installed and inspected generator (contact the PUD if you have recently installed a generator)
- Clean drinking water, at least one gallon for each person per day
- Battery-powered radio

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