

# READY: 'He has spent the last 10 years getting us into the 23rd century ...'

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Every local highway was impassible in some areas due to flooding, debris or downed trees. With weather making helicopter flights impossible and high surf blocking ships and boats, the county fended for itself.

Resources dwindled, along with any immediate prospects of relief.

"We were basically here, at the northwest corner of the state, completely shut off from everything," Clatsop County Sheriff Tom Bergin said. "Everything was just a mess."

Following the storm, Bergin advocated for a state law that allowed potentially hazardous trees to be removed from roadways. Since the law passed five years ago, many of the trees that likely would have created obstacles in a future storm have been cut.

## Baptism by fire

Emergency officials and first responders struggled to communicate with each other — much less the outside world.

Landslides breached both of the county's fiber optic rings on U.S. Highway 30 and in Tillamook, halting telephone and internet usage in the entire county.

"Nobody ever thought it would be possible to breach both rings," said Astoria Emergency Communications Manager Jeff Rusiecki, who had started work at his position just a few months before the storm. "It was kind of a baptism by fire."

Power outages squashed any chances of normal communication. Even radio sites, such as Astoria 911 Dispatch's radio repeater at Coxcomb Hill, were compromised. With no way of relaying information to the outside world, state agencies could not adequately address the county's mounting problems.

"You can't get the message out that we're having problems, and it's really hard to explain the problem to them," Strong said. "They think, 'Oh, they're doing OK because they're not crying for help,' when really it was hard to do that. You couldn't do that."

The outages also affected police, fire and medical emergency services. Officials who managed the storm response stressed that, while communications were shut down, amateur radio operators became a saving grace.

Dozens of operators spread out to different dispatch centers in the county, offering a medium for communication between dispatchers and emergency responders.

Meanwhile, hundreds of Pacific Power workers — and some who came from outside the state — worked to repair power poles and more than 60 miles of transmission lines.

Since the storm, Rusiecki has led efforts to harden communication systems — creating more radio sites, establishing more common radio communication channels between first responders, and expanding satellite phone capabilities. He also lessened the dispatch center's reliance on fiber-optic cables by creating other communication paths such as microwave frequencies.

"He has spent the last 10 years getting us into the 23rd century as far as I'm concerned," Bergin said of Rusiecki.

Pacific Power also solidified its system by braiding wires with cable, strengthening poles and using more resilient types of metal. Tom Gauntt, a Pacific Power spokesman, likened the damage sustained in the storm to a totaled car.

"Essentially you had an entire system that needed to be replaced," Gauntt said.

But as time progresses, those capabilities will need to be regularly updated, Brown said. "Communications are an ongoing project."

One potential project could be adding



DAMIAN MULINIX

Residents waited two hours or more to buy a limited amount of gas at the Short Stop Shell station in Seaview. It was the only station on the Peninsula selling gas to consumers — the Pioneer market Chevron sold only to emergency vehicles.



ALEX PAJUNAS

Storm victims pick out military MREs (Meals Ready to Eat) at Camp Rilea, which offered warm meals and shelter from the storm.



MARK ROZIN

John Hellingson with Custom Excavating of Astoria examines the damage from a fallen tree, which landed above the children's bedroom.

more radio sites in South County, which still relies on one site at Tillamook Head, Rusiecki said. The topography of the area presents a challenge.

But if all else fails again, some old tricks from the 2007 storm may come in handy. When planning the county's emergency operations center, Brown started by allowing local amateur radio operators to set up everything they would need in a disaster.

"We have the most robust amateur radio communications system in the state of Oregon," she said.

## More tools

In 2007, the emergency services coordinator worked in the sheriff's office — then located on Duane Street. When the storms hit in early December, Strong was responsible for coordinating with police, fire, emergency medical services, transportation and public works agencies.

Training county employees to per-

form specific duties during an emergency proved difficult, as they typically would prioritize other aspects of their daily workload.

"We all sat down and said, 'The emergency management situation has outgrown the sheriff's office,'" Bergin said. "It's a bigger deal than the sheriff can take and do correctly. It needs to have its own office and its own people working for it."

Strong became a full-time employee shortly after the storm, and other part-time employees were hired to help him. Eventually, the department fell under the purview of the county manager's office. It now consists of two full-time employees — Brown and Emergency Management Coordinator Vincent Aarts.

The two employees also have more tools to work with than Strong did.

The county revamped its emergency operations plan by 2011. The plan, which will be revised again by next year, is hundreds of pages long, 138 of which are

posted on the county website.

"The plan itself was inspired by the 2007 storm," Brown said. "There hadn't been a whole lot of guidance about emergency operations. We learned that we're really good at what we do until things get to a certain size or scale, and then we need to do something different."

The county lacked a natural hazards mitigation plan, which prompted concerns following the storm. A plan created since then ensures that the county will be eligible for emergency funding from outside government agencies.

The county built a new 1,200-square-foot emergency operations center at Camp Rilea in 2013. Pacific County also built an operations center in South Bend, Washington.

Staff at the centers coordinate disaster management efforts, relay information to residents and ask for resources from the states and disseminate them.

"We have sunk an incredible amount of resources into the public safety infrastructure," Brown said. "The storm really got people to sit up and pay more attention."

## Residents must plan, too

Emergency management officials consistently preach that residents prepare themselves and their families for a disaster — have a kit, have a plan.

During the 2007 storm, residents who were not prepared to support themselves made the county's efforts more difficult, officials say.

For instance, even people in rural areas of the county who owned generators didn't necessarily stock enough fuel. Those hoping to purchase supplies at a store in the days before the storm were often unsuccessful.

"Things do, during a disaster, fly off the shelves," Strong said. "There's not enough emergency responders to go rescue everybody. You have to prioritize, and that's a tough thing. Where do you go first? Who do you rescue first? When you have every citizen somehow impacted, you can't be everywhere."

The scale of the 2007 gale can be hard to envision in Clatsop County, an area not typically prone to storms of that severity.

"We live in a really great area," Strong said, "but we do need to remember there are hazards around us."

More residents appear to have embraced the message.

Generator sales soared in the year after the storm. Roughly 500 people earned an amateur radio license.

"I think the mindset is starting to change," Brown said. "I think everyone has moved the ball down the field in terms of their own personal preparedness."

## 2007 // TIMELINE OF EVENTS

### THURSDAY, NOV. 29

National Weather Service issues a warning for a storm heading toward the Oregon Coast.

### FRIDAY, NOV. 30

Coast Guard announces possibility of multiple bar closures beginning Sunday because of potential for extreme winds and heavy seas.

### SATURDAY, DEC. 1

It rains like crazy up and down the North Coast and inland with intermittent sleet plus snowfall on higher elevations.

### SUNDAY, DEC. 2

Winds start to pick up as the day progresses. A gust of 105 mph is recorded to Cape Mears in Tillamook County.

### MONDAY, DEC. 3

The 911 emergency phone system throughout Clatsop County went down. Forty-two amateur radio operators come to the rescue. Clatsop County loses all long-distance phone service.

### TUESDAY, DEC. 4

U.S. Highway 30 reopens with a pilot car guiding traffic through the flood-damaged section of road between Westport and Clatskanie. UPS and U.S. Postal Service deliveries resume. Fifty-three 45-foot power poles arrive in Astoria.

### WEDNESDAY, DEC. 5

By mid-morning, Pacific Power says the central Astoria area may have power back by later afternoon. At noon, the company reports only 1,000 of the county's 23,000 customers have power. Power is restored to Lincoln and Coos counties, allowing more get Clatsop back up.

### THURSDAY, DEC. 6

With 370 employees working in the field, Pacific Power cuts the number of Clatsop County customer outages down to 7,500 at 4:30 p.m. Most Astoria and Warrenton residents have power; Seaside and Cannon Beach are largely still without.

### FRIDAY, DEC. 7

State Sen. Betsy Johnson, Rep. Brad Witt and Congressman David Wu visit. After flying over the storm-ravaged region, Wu reports the area is "way over" the thresholds for federal disaster assistance.