

County making progress in Cascadia preparations

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STAFF WRITER

When a wind storm knocked out power to Hermiston recently, it sent residents scurrying to nearby towns in search of food, fuel and Wi-Fi.

If the Cascadia earthquake hits, those same people who couldn't last three hours without electricity will likely have to last several weeks without it.

No electricity. No internet. No landlines. No cell phone reception. No debit/credit card readers. No gasoline for sale.

That's the prediction for Eastern Oregon residents if "the big one" hits, which seismologists at Oregon State University give about a one in three chance of happening in the next 50 years.

In Umatilla County, a collection of nonprofit and government entities keep chipping away at preparations year after year.

"It goes back to what we preach to the citizens," Umatilla County emergency manager Tom Roberts said. "The more prepared you are, the less others have to worry about you. The same goes for the counties, the more prepared they are the less the state has to worry about us."

Some progress has been made since a summit last May brought various public and private leaders together to discuss earthquake preparations. Recently the ham



STAFF PHOTO BY E.J. HARRIS
When a major Cascadia earthquake hits there will be widespread power outages that could last for weeks.

radio equipment in the county's emergency management center was modified so that the county now has the ability to contact the Federal Emergency Management Agency's Region 10 office in Bothell, Washington, and other federal agencies like the Department of Homeland Security directly in the event that the Oregon Emergency Management command center is down.

It very well could be if Cascadia strikes. According to a state audit released in January, the Oregon Office of Emergency Management's command center is not seismically retrofitted, meaning there's a good chance it could collapse or be damaged in a quake. There are three alternative sites identified, but two of those are also at risk of collapse, and OEM has

not practiced running a command center out of any of them.

The audit also found that only two-thirds of state agencies have a plan for continuity of operations should catastrophe strike, and far fewer have actually trained staff on the plans.

"Without these plans in place," the audit warns, "Oregon's government is at serious risk of failing to continue with or reestablish its key operations following a catastrophic event."

Even if the county can communicate with the state during a catastrophe, area Amateur Radio Emergency Service (ARES/RACES) coordinator Alan Polan said FEMA may still want to communicate directly with Umatilla County to get a better idea of damage and resources.



Umatilla County Emergency Coordinator Alan Polan reads out his call sign on a ham radio during a text of the Federal Emergency Management Agency's Region 10 ham radio network on Wednesday in Pendleton.

"It helps FEMA have better situational awareness," Polan said. "... The government will be trying to figure out how to get the most bang for their buck in terms of response."

Local ham radio operators are participating in exercises with FEMA the third Wednesday of each month so that they'll know just what to do in the event of a real emergency.

In the past year the county has also worked to build more partnerships with church groups and nonprofits that could mobilize in the event of a disaster. Last Wednesday Roberts was meeting with Mike West of Team Rubicon, a nonprofit collection of mostly veterans, retired law enforcement and retired medical personnel who respond to disas-

ters. In the past the organization has been focused on responding to national and international disasters like hurricanes, but Team Rubicon recently helped clean up a flooded farm outside of Milton-Freewater, and West said they have become interested in having local chapters respond to more local challenges.

"It gives people a great opportunity to come and serve," he said, noting that he would like to start having at least one event a month in order to help build a sense of community among area volunteers and help them gain experience that could come in handy during a larger disaster.

Roberts said Team Rubicon could provide some "fantastic capacities" for the county in the event of a

disaster, from physical labor to helping manage "spontaneous volunteers" who often show up to help with a disaster without training or affiliation.

"They can help backfill staff, do mitigation," Roberts said. "Those are areas a lot of emergency managers lose sleep at night wondering, 'How am I going to do that?'"

Roberts said after the Cascadia summit last year several church groups also reached out to him, as well as businesses.

Cities that participated in the summit are also doing a good job of starting to prepare for a Cascadia-level event, he said, citing Pendleton and Weston as two examples doing a "bang-up job" of creating an emergency preparedness committee and encouraging resiliency in the community.

He also cited the work of the Local Emergency Preparedness Committee, made up of local industries handling large amounts of hazardous materials. They are legally required to meet in committee, he said, but Umatilla County's group has been cited as a "flagship" example in the state of going above and beyond what is required in planning for a disaster.

They recently received a grant to host some tabletop training exercises with Dean Marcum, who specializes in designing such exercises.

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