

Florida's Water/Wastewater Response Network (FlaWARN)

By Chris Roeder

As the 2005 hurricane season approaches, both citizens and utility workers of Florida are reminded of the many valuable lessons and experiences they gained from the storms of 2004.

After four major hurricanes in 2 months the vast number of utility companies that were deployed to the disaster areas gained more insight to 'hands on' situations than any refresher course or textbook could ever provide. The most important lesson for these companies was realizing how the concept of "utilities helping utilities" proved to be the best method for getting systems up and running again. During these hurricanes truckloads of generators were moved and shared between utilities. With electricity out in many areas for weeks, water and wastewater utilities throughout Florida faced many challenges to keep plants and pump stations running. Utility crews were dispatched to all ends of the state, sometimes only on faith that the costs would be recovered, with no formal mutual aid agreement.

These hurricanes and other events over the past few years in Florida and the nation indicated the need for a formal process for water/wastewater utilities to share resources during times of emergency. North-East Florida Municipal Emergency Planners (NEFMEP) began meeting in the late '90's at the DEP Northeast District in Jacksonville.

After 9/11/01, NEFMEP meetings became more critical with active law enforcement and University of Florida representatives joining the group to focus on security cooperation, as well as mutual-aid.

All of these situations culminated in a renewed push in 2004 to set up a formalized structure for water utilities to assist other water utilities, with the aim to have the resources online, before the next hurricane season arrives.

Florida's Water-Wastewater Agency Response Network, referred to as FlaWARN is the formalized system of 'utilities helping utilities' to address mutual aid during emergency situations. FlaWARN is being developed by utilities with the help of internet security experts, law enforcement and the University of Florida TREEO Center. The project's infrastructure will consist of a secure web-based data bank of available resources and a practical mutual aid agreement designed to reduce bureaucratic road blocks in times of emergency.

At the heart of FlaWARN, is a secure website that serves as a nexus. The design challenge for this system includes sharing of emergency and security information with a wide range of users while, at the same time, insuring an advanced level of security for the site itself. The aim is for a secure but robust foundation responsive to the evolving needs of the participating agencies. This will be accomplished using an online data bank including an available resource inventory. Members will share information on inventory availability.

The anticipated benefits to FlaWARN members include assistance with the following issues:

- Recovery coordination
- Resource inventory and availability status
- Information exchange
- Vulnerability assessment tools
- Preparation protocols
- Emergency Response Plan (ERP) updates and checklists
- Updated best management practices (BMP) reference library
- Up-to-date status reports
- Pertinent legislation briefings

To help guide FlaWARN a “Steering Committee” has been formed including various city and county officials, who also represent major industry associations. The Steering Committee members include: Rob Hungate, Orlando Utilities Commission; representing: FSAWWA; Ray Hanson, Orange County; representing: FWEA; Brad Macek, City of Port St. Lucie; representing: FWPCOA; Gary Williams, Florida Rural Water Association; representing: FRWA; and Ed Cordova of the Florida Department Environmental Protection Northeast District.

The Steering Committee and other members of FlaWARN have begun implementing their planned goals for the growth and success of this project. One such goal already underway is the development of a comprehensive Mutual Aid Agreement. Some other goals currently in progress are recruitment of new members and establishing a secure yet highly informative website.

To learn more about “utilities helping utilities” or to become a member of FlaWARN visit WWW.FLAWARN.ORG, or contact: Chris Roeder, 352.392.9570 x 203 or croeder@treeo.ufl.edu; or Carol Hinton, 352.392.9570 x 209 or chinton@treeo.ufl.edu.