

UF/TREEO Deploys Newly Created Statewide Water Facility Emergency Response Network to Aid Mississippi

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GAINESVILLE, Fla. — The Florida Water/Wastewater Agency Response Network (FlaWARN), a newly established statewide organization administered by the University of Florida, responded September 3, 2005 to the overwhelming water/wastewater crisis in Mississippi. Answering the Mississippi Rural Water Association's (MRWA) cry for help, the UF/TREEO center began dispatching crews to southern Mississippi to help protect public health and waterways by quickly bringing facilities back on line.

“Communications are lost here — everything is down, and we really appreciate this equipment and all the help offered from Florida” said Pete Boone, MRWA executive director.

UF/TREEO worked with the Florida Rural Water Association and Florida Section American Water Works Association, to mobilize crews from Gainesville Regional Utilities, City of Tampa Bay Water Department, JEA, Toho Water Authority, City of Stuart, Orange County Utilities, Destin Water Users, Emerald Coast Utility Authority, and South Walton Utility.

The University of Florida Center for Training, Research and Education for Environmental Occupations (UF/TREEO) has provided training for environmental and health and safety professionals since 1977. Following the unprecedented 2004 hurricane season, the Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) secured \$180,000 in funding to help Florida's drinking water and wastewater facilities prepare for and recover from disasters. DEP turned to UF/TREEO to administer the program and establish a Web-based information resource network. The virtual clearinghouse for water and wastewater utilities facilitates the sharing of emergency preparedness and response equipment along with information on mutual aid.

Florida's Water / Wastewater Agency Response Network (FlaWARN) got its first 'trial by hurricane' as Dennis slogged into the panhandle July 2005. This new mutual aid organization contributed greatly to successful recovery efforts, said Bill Engel, Ph.D., director of the University of Florida Center for Training, Research and Education for Environmental Occupations (UF/TREEO). Before the hurricane

made landfall, at-risk water agencies in the panhandle began implementing FlaWARN to make advance arrangements with utilities from unaffected areas.

State and local utilities, Internet security experts, and law enforcement have joined forces with UF to create FlaWARN. And while it is a work in progress, with the Web site still under construction, FlaWARN administrators at the UF/TREEO Center decided to launch the network early with the approach of Hurricane Dennis, providing members with updated emergency contact information and assistance requests.

“As Hurricane Dennis approached, we decided to roll out FlaWARN even though it was not yet fully functional,” said Carol Hinton, associate director at UF/TREEO. “We felt this would at least give our members the advantage of FlaWARN’s new data bank to help with their mutual aid efforts.”

“We were there within 24 hours — right after the hurricane hit,” said Scott Kelly of JEA, adding that “pre-planning” was key to FlaWARN’s role in that recovery effort.

After the deluge from Dennis, JEA crews quickly stabilized South Walton’s water system and moved to the community of Destin to provide aid there, even though that utility is not currently a member of FlaWARN.

“We’re not going to turn down anybody in their time of need,” Kelly said, referring to agencies that had not yet registered with FlaWARN or signed the Mutual Aid Agreement (MAA), “but it clearly makes a difference in our ability to do pre-planning and prepare to help folks quickly.”

At the heart of the FlaWARN concept is a carefully crafted Mutual Aid Agreement aimed at reducing bureaucratic red tape before an emergency occurs. While it is not a requirement for registering with FlaWARN, signing the MAA is highly encouraged to ease the reimbursement process for agencies responding to aid requests. Potential responding utilities can check the FlaWARN website to quickly determine if an agency requesting aid already has a signed agreement in place.

“The crisis in Mississippi proves that as an agency, we can quickly mobilize and bring resources to communities even if they are not already members,” said Hinton.

For more information about FlaWARN, go to www.FlaWARN.org, or contact Carol Hinton at 352/392-9570 ext. 209.