



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Columbia County Homeland Security and Emergency Management Commission releases lessons learned from the Winter Storms of 2008/09

Officials from throughout Columbia County recently reviewed actions taken during winter storms that occurred from mid-December through mid-January in order to be more prepared for the next major emergency.

During that time period, Columbia County endured several weeks of heavy snow, ice, high winds and subsequent runoff flooding mixed with heavy rain. At various times during those weeks, shelters were opened, emergency alerts were broadcasted for flooded and landslide-prone areas and evacuations were ordered. The cities of St. Helens, Vernonia and Clatskanie as well as Columbia County all declared states of emergency and requested mutual aid from other counties, the State of Oregon, and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

The Columbia County Emergency Operations Center was activated at various times as well to help coordinate and manage resources and information. Public infrastructure damages and response costs added up to several millions dollars and local businesses were impacted by snow- and water-covered roadways. The costs of responding to these emergencies may impact budgets throughout Columbia County.

In late January, representatives from the cities, Columbia County, emergency services agencies, non-profit groups and state agencies met in Clatskanie to discuss what went well during the response to the storms and what things could be improved upon. The issues presented help emergency management officials and elected leaders see if emergency planning and training are working properly and what more can be done to enhance response to future events. After-action review sessions such as these are typically held after any major emergency or disaster drill.

The major strengths identified during the storms were as follows:

- Road and utility crews worked very well together, going to incident areas in teams to make sure roads were clear and that power lines could be quickly restored.
- Citizen Emergency Response Teams (CERTs) from Clatskanie, Vernonia and St. Helens were extremely useful in assisting jurisdictions with checking on citizens and answering phone calls from the public.
- Multiple agencies stated that WebEOC©, an incident management computer program used during the January storms, was especially helpful in coordinating information and actions taken.
- There was prudent use of the Columbia Alert Network (CAN), an emergency notification system operated by Columbia 911, to alert citizens of possible mudslides and actual flooding situations.
- Assistance from the Oregon National Guard in the form of Humvee four-wheel drive vehicles was invaluable, allowing emergency responders to assist rural residents during the heavy snowfall.

Throughout the storms, several opportunities for improvement in Columbia County's ability to respond to the incident were identified. Some primary areas of improvement discovered were:

- The long-term need for additional plows, sandbags and four-wheel drive vehicles in Columbia County.
- The desire to continue to better coordinate emergency needs calls between the county emergency operations center and special needs agencies.
- The request to train additional city and county officials to use the WebEOC© program.

Although these events were not as bad as those that took place in December 2007, many agency leaders noted at the meeting that the storms provided a successful "test" of emergency procedures and plans. Local agencies will continue to work together to improve response and review any other learned lessons that may arise.

Due to these weather events, Columbia County was declared a disaster area by two federal agencies:

- The Federal Emergency Management Agency, which is providing financial recovery dollars to cover up to 75% of local government agencies' eligible public infrastructure and emergency response expenses incurred during a portion of the storm running from December 20 through 26. However, officials from the county and the City of Clatskanie are working with state and federal officials to expand the program to cover costs incurred during January's storms as well.
- The Small Business Administration, which is providing low-interest loan

programs for businesses adversely affected by the storms. Businesses interested in the program are urged to call 1-800-659-2955.

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