

Emergency Response Planning is the First Step to Dealing With an Emergency

After a summer of extreme heat and drought conditions, much of eastern Kansas has seen excessive amounts of rainfall in the period from late August to mid-October. This photo shows flooding in Allen County on October 8.

As I write this article the rain continues to fall and all of Dickinson County is under a flood watch. My hometown of Enterprise sits on the south bank of the Smoky Hill River. Minor flooding occurs at 26 feet and we anxiously watch the USGS gauge station. The last reading was at 20.36 feet and has been rising about 0.2 feet per hour. Our city proper does not flood but access to town is restricted when it goes over the highway north of town.

Many times, in my years of service in the fire department and assisting our county emergency management office I have seen cities and water districts start to worry about their respective systems when a disaster is on the doorstep. I am sorry to say that by waiting until the water is this high is too late in the game. As water or wastewater operators it is our job to have emergency plans in place long before the storm hits. Your plan should be in writing and all staff should know the trigger to begin implementation of your response plan.

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We are fortunate in Enterprise in the fact that flooding only can have a small impact on our water system. Our wells are located two miles north of the city. The wells themselves do not flood and all our controls and telemetry junction boxes are above the flood plain. Our biggest issue is accessing our chlorination building when the highway is closed. So we ensure the supply of chlorine is enough to last as long as access is restricted. Our wastewater system is impacted more than the water system. Our present treatment lagoons are not in a

flood plain but are in a flood way. We have running water that surrounds our lagoons. If the water does reach historic benchmarks we have to obtain permission from the Kansas Department of Health & Environment (KDHE) to emergency bypass our lagoons and pump from our finishing cell into the flood waters. If we do not pump the finishing cells our aerators in the first cells will overload and shut down as well as the head pressure from

our lift station becomes too great and the lift station will over-top as well as backing sewage into customers' homes.

Then there is the issue of our drainage ditch that runs through the center of town past our lift station. The 1993 flood over-topped our lift station. Following the flood, the city received FEMA funds to replace the lift station with a modern pre-cast concrete wet well that is well above the 500-year flood plain. FEMA also funded a new flood gate that has to be closed when the river reaches 27 feet. This works well to keep the river water out of town but once closed we have to be prepared to pump any rain water that falls that is now held on the city side of the flood gate, over the bank of the river. A member of my staff just returned from Wichita with a rental pump of sufficient size to handle the amount of flow possible once the gate is closed. It is my hope that I have wasted the money in renting the pump, but we are prepared if it is needed and we will not have damage by the water on the city side of the flood gate and entering the manufacturing facility located next to the drainage ditch.

I share this story to hopefully raise everyone's attention about the need for emergency planning. Benjamin Franklin was quoted as saying "Failing to plan is planning to fail". All water and wastewater systems are supposed to have emergency plans. I mean – plans that have value and purpose, not just a stack of paper to satisfy a requirement. Plans need to be reviewed annually as personnel and

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contacts change. Also, if you list a resource in your plan be sure that the resource listed knows they are listed and agreeable to assist in an emergency. An example is our local long-term care home here at Enterprise. They had our old boarding high school listed as a location to evacuate their residents to in an

emergency. The problem is that school has been closed for eight years; their plan was of no value.

Safe and reliable drinking water and efficient wastewater services are vital to every community. Water and wastewater utilities are responsible for ensuring that they are protected against a variety of threats that could affect providing operations. Your Kansas Rural Water Association offers assistance in emergency planning. Kansas Rural Water Association provides training sessions conducted by experts with decades of experience on the topic of emergency planning. Please feel free to call KRWA and ask for assistance before your next emergency.

Paul Froelich is City Superintendent at Enterprise, Kansas. Since 1983, he has worked extensively in law enforcement, emergency management and municipal operations. He holds numerous accreditations in Emergency Management and Fire and is a certified water and wastewater operator.





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