

# Interagency Cooperation: Putting Emergency Preparedness to the Test

Photo: Washington State Department of Transportation



I-5 flooded in Lewis County, December 2007.

**E**arly on December 3, 2007, trouble was brewing over the Willapa Hills of Washington, headwaters of the Chehalis River. Three storms combined their forces, letting loose an unpredicted torrent.

Downstream, the Lewis County Health Department was ready.

It had already developed a strong partnership with the county's Department of Emergency Management. Its staff had trained in incident command and risk communication, and they were about to put their training to work.

Even though the region had experienced 100-year floods in 1991 and 1996, the coming storm would set a record. The U.S. Geological Survey measured peak stream flow near Doty, Washington, at 63,100 cubic feet per second (cfs) on December 3.

Before dawn, the Lewis County Emergency Communications Center (ECC) was activated and the Health Department went on alert. By mid-afternoon, Health Department offices were deserted as staff dispersed through the rural county.

Because of the trust level that had been built between the Department of Emergency Management and the Health Department, health staff was invited to help take 911 calls. This was the first time the health department was invited into the ECC during the rescue phase of a disaster.

During the first three days, the ECC handled over 1,400 calls. More than 200 people were rescued by helicopter and 300 by boat. Amazingly, only one life was lost.

In addition to the ECC, command centers were set up in the hard-hit rural communities of Adna, Boistfort, and Doty. These command centers became a crucial meeting place for the surrounding communities.

Doug Wangen, the county's public health response manager, acted as the county's health liaison during the rescue and recovery phases. He called in colleagues from Environmental Health during the recovery phase, to address concerns about drinking water, solid waste, food establishments, mold, and flooded septic systems.

By December 6, regional volunteer response teams, consisting of a mental health professional and a public health nurse, were deployed. Each team was assigned a community, which allowed them to build trust and familiarity.

Meanwhile, environmental health teams faced daunting challenges. Fifty-five food establishments were flooded and eight had to be closed permanently. More than 250 water systems were affected, including the one serving the town of Pe Ell. Home and business owners needed information about personal protection as they prepared to clean up mold.

A drinking water specialist worked with the ECC's information section to let residents know where to get bottled water and free well testing.

More than 1,400 livestock perished in the flood, and disposal became a public health issue. More than 13,000 tons of solid waste was generated. The county, along with the state departments of health, agriculture, ecology, and a solid waste facility, set up drop stations for livestock and solid waste.

In Pe Ell and Boistfort, where the water supply was disrupted, the health department brought in large shower units and hand wash stations, which got a steady stream of residents and volunteers.

The command centers were particularly important because normal communication channels were disrupted. Two local radio stations were flooded, as was one fire station, which lost its radios. Phone lines went out, and the emergency operation center in the county's largest city, Centralia, was landlocked by flood waters.

A year after the flood, the health department appreciates the value of having public health staff versed in incident command, making risk communication training an annual requirement, and maintaining close relations to emergency preparedness partners. ■

## Authors

Kathleen Eussen is Director and Doug Wangen Assessment Team Director with the Lewis County Health Department in Washington.

Kathleen Eussen  
Doug Wangen

More Information  
Photos of the I-5 floods  
can be viewed at  
[www.outdoorslc.com/  
multimedia/flood2009.php](http://www.outdoorslc.com/multimedia/flood2009.php)