

## A Perspective on Emergency Preparedness

*Regardless of the type of dangerous weather event, it pays to be prepared at all times*



**Barbara Johnson** is public relations manager for Tillamook PUD in Tillamook, Oregon.

My eyes were riveted on the dark, ominous skies. As I watched, the storm clouds blended into eerie shades I vividly remembered from my youth during Midwest storms and tornadoes.

But this wasn't my childhood. It was Friday, October 14, 2016, and it would be one for the record books. Before noon, two tornadoes hit nearby, including one that briefly touched down in Oceanside and another that ripped through Manzanita. Buildings and homes were damaged, trees and power lines were down and tangled.

Thankfully, no one was injured.

The National Weather Service in Portland issued 10 tornado warnings that day. Prior to that, it had never issued more than three in a day. The Manzanita tornado was only the fifth tornado in Tillamook County since reliable records began in 1950.

Tillamook PUD is the electric service provider for 21,000 customers, covering an area of 1,125 square miles. Restoring power safely and efficiently after a major storm or emergency requires significant logistical expertise, skilled workers and appropriate equipment.

Our line crews mobilized quickly in the tornado's aftermath. Through close coordination with public works and other agencies, debris was cleared so crews could make repairs and get the lights back on for nearly 3,000 customers. Support staff worked to keep vehicles and equipment running smoothly, supplies ready and onsite, and workers fed.

Amazingly, just 24 hours later, fewer than 500 customers remained without power.

Tornadoes may be rare here, but severe weather is not. We often experience hurricane-force winds and heavy rains. Massive flooding and landslides can close roads, and downed trees and power lines can cause extensive power outages that leave residents stranded and in the dark.

Having an emergency plan helps navigate the challenges that come with these extreme situations. With these plans, we are better prepared to mitigate damage and keep people safe.

My co-workers and I recently received training on the Federal Emergency Management Agency's Incident Command System. ICS is a tool used during an event to manage people and resources from multiple agencies under a single organizational structure.

As part of the training, we were given an emergency scenario and asked to use the ICS to manage the situation. We were assigned roles and responsibilities to work through the exercise. As is the case of many real-life situations, our "crisis" escalated, giving us a sense of what we might experience during a full-scale disaster.

The ICS training not only illustrated the importance of being prepared. It gave us a better understanding of how our utility would integrate with other responders during a true emergency.

In March 2011, a 9.1-magnitude earthquake struck Japan. It lasted about six minutes and triggered a catastrophic tsunami that caused vast devastation.

Experts say the Pacific Northwest is vulnerable to a similar disaster. Scientists tell us the Cascadia Subduction Zone—which lies offshore from northern Vancouver Island to Northern California—is capable of generating an 8.0-plus-magnitude earthquake, causing at least four minutes of shaking or rolling, and creating a tsunami up to 100 feet high.

History has shown a disaster of this magnitude is difficult to overcome. But businesses, schools, governments and communities as a whole can take steps to be safer during a disaster and resilient after.

As individuals, we have many resources available to develop emergency plans and put together kits. While 72-hour emergency kits are good for limited disasters, the Oregon Office of Emergency Management recommends being "2-Weeks Ready."

The OEM points us to [ready.gov](http://ready.gov) for the latest preparedness information and how to build an emergency kit. It also suggests we have conversations with family about transportation methods and routes; caring for children, seniors and pets; identifying a family meeting place; and selecting an out-of-state contact person.

Disasters and emergencies can take shape in a variety of forms and strike any place, any time.

I was several miles from the tornadoes last October, but the pre-tornado thunderstorm and the twisters were reminders of how important it is to be prepared.

While each situation is unique and there is no one-size-fits-all solution, with proper planning and coordinated response efforts, we will recover safer, faster and more effectively in any emergency. ■