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Preparing for Disaster

“Forewarned, forearmed, to be prepared is half the victory.”

Miquel de Cervantes Saavedra sums it up well when facing the aftermath of a natural disaster. Floods, hurricanes, severe storms, even fires can create conditions that soon lead to overwhelming numbers of mosquitoes. Preparing for an unexpected event can help you to cope with increased demands for service and could save both time and money. Regardless of the type of event, having a plan for your program, keeping in touch with the emergency management agency in your local jurisdiction and knowing some basics about EMAC and FEMA are all good strategies to help things go smoothly when responding to a disaster.

When a major hurricane is threatening one of our coasts and the evacuation notice goes out, most districts have some sort of plan for moving equipment out of harm's way, but what about the most important resource in a program - the employees? Communication can be next to impossible if local cell phone towers and phone lines are down. The local emergency management agency will have their emergency operations center up and running before, during and after an event. Make sure everyone knows what number to call to check in and get instructions.



After an event there may be many safety hazards that did not exist before. Downed power lines, flooded streets, road hazards due to debris and displaced animals - both wildlife and pets - are just a few safety issues to be aware of. In addition, local medical facilities may not be operational meaning the nearest hospital is now hundreds of miles away. It is a good idea to have a plan and make sure everyone is trained to both recognize and respond to these safety hazards. It is also a good idea to make sure everyone has basic first aid training in the event something does happen.

Plan ahead for how to deal with the increased mosquito populations you know will be coming. After an event, it usually takes a week or two until mosquito numbers explode. This is not the time to create a response plan. You may need this time to deal with other unexpected items such as damage to facilities and equipment. You may also have a reduced work force as some employees will likely have to deal with personal property damage. Do you have intergovernmental agreements in place to get help from neighboring programs if needed?



Large storms cause significant ecological damage that can drastically alter natural drainages. Roads may be impassable for months after a severe storm. Residents and city workers will be cleaning up storm debris and placing it on the sides of roads. This debris can create a “canyon” effect making fogging from a truck next to useless. Are you prepared to deal with the eventuality that you might not be able to treat from the ground right away? If you don't have aerial capability, consider having an emergency contract already in place. This can save time getting bids and allows the contractor to plan ahead for their logistical needs.

Your local emergency management agency is the first place you should go to start preparing. If you don't already interact with them, pick up the phone and start today. When vector control issues arise, they can't pass them on to you if they don't know you exist. Also, they can't pass on important safety information you might need to be aware of if you are not on their contact list. A great deal of confusion and misunderstanding can be avoided if you already interact with them.



Do you know what your options are for getting help? Do you know what EMAC can do for you? EMAC stands for Emergency Management Assistance Compact. It is a mutual assistance program between states, and has been used to provide assistance for emergency mosquito monitoring. Go to <http://www.emacweb.org> to get information on this program. Among other things EMAC is a mechanism for spelling out who pays and who is liable for loaned resources. It doesn't have to be a federally declared disaster for EMAC assistance.

For federally declared disasters, knowing ahead of time how to interact with FEMA can save you a lot of time and frustration. Familiarize yourself with the FEMA vector control policy. It can be found at http://www.fema.gov/government/grant/pa/9523_10.shtm. Knowing in advance what is eligible for reimbursement and what you will need to document can save both time and money. In addition, the policy clearly defines how FEMA and CDC interact for consultation on the need for vector control.

There is no way to prepare for every eventuality. Every disaster plays out differently and rules change as we move forward and learn from past events. Keeping abreast of changes in requirements, safety training refresher courses, updating contact information and reviewing contracts can all be a lot of work, but when it is time to control mosquitoes after an event this preparation is well worth the effort. It allows you to focus more clearly on the myriad other mundane details that go into protecting the public.