



The

Broadcasters' Desktop Resource

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... edited by Barry Mishkind – the Eclectic Engineer

Clay's Corner

Recovery in the Aftermath of a Disaster



By Clay Freinwald

[July 2014] With a hurricane currently working its way up the East Coast, this is a good time to consider whether your plant is prepared to cope with the aftermath of a local disaster.

As you may imagine, Clay has some thoughts to share on the subject.

Floods, hurricanes, earthquakes, tornados, forest fires, chemical leaks, and other disasters do happen. It is a fact of life. Such natural disasters and emergency situations often are accompanied by loss of local utility and/or communication grids.

The question for broadcasters is: what plans to do you have to keep operating despite the worst that can happen?

I feel that too many stations severely underestimate just how bad such an event could be, how long it might take for broadcast stations to get back on the air and serve the community – and, in general, have failed to plan accordingly.

VULNERABLE

Like many areas where seismic activity is common, we here in Western Washington have been warned that among the events that could critic-

ally affect our area a mega-earthquake is quite possible.

I have been speaking with the folks at WSEM (Washington State Emergency Management) about what to do after a major quake hits this area. Among the topics was a list of services that would be out of commission and for how long.

But before we get to that list, let us take a look at what our world might well be like after a major earthquake.

COPING DURING EMERGENCIES

For one thing, just about all utilities will be out.

That includes cellular and land-line phone systems that either will not be working or will be so overtaxed as to be useless.

The massive power outages will force citizens to turn on their car radios or, if they are smart enough, to start cranking on that wind-up radio to try and find out just how bad things are. Then again it is likely few people do own them now because this would require paying attention to warnings and spending money as a result.

Either way, once listeners are able to locate a functioning radio station, the question is whether broadcasters will be able to get the official information to their listeners – or whether the listeners will be served by automated hits and spot breaks.

With all convention communications systems knocked out, quite possibly Ham Radio will be the one to come to the rescue. I can see those emergency management facilities becoming a bee-hive of coordination and disaster recovery, with the Hams providing the communications circuits to the broadcasters who will be informing the public.

EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION

How will you or your radio station fare after a major disaster?

You may have noticed that I have not mentioned television. There are a couple of problems preventing many TV stations being of large impact after a major disaster: 1) TV stations generally are not very hardened and 2) There are very few portable battery-powered or crank-up TV sets.

The bottom line is everyone in the broadcast industry has a lot of work to do in order to prepare properly for whatever the local “big-one” events are likely. A good first step is to try and find out how to get those with the power and authority to make plans for disseminating information during difficult times.

MORE THAN A FEW HOURS

I have written about the mega-earthquake predicted for Washington State several times and my concerns remain the same.

Just like the Oso Mud Slide earlier this year that made national news as it virtually wiped out a small community, earthquakes have no advance warning. As they say in the emergency management world, they are self-announcing.

But what about the aftermath?

The *Seattle Times* ran a great story about how long disruptions caused by a big quake would last. If you did not [read this](#), I recommend highly that you do so – and use it as a basis for a serious conversation with station management.

Here are some examples from that story of how long it could well be before normal conditions are restored in several categories:

- Water Supplies – 1 month to 1 year. (What is your staff going to drink?)
- Sewage Treatment – 1 month to 3 years.
- Electricity – One to three months (How many stations have concrete plans to run their generators for 3 months?)
- Petroleum Distribution– 1 to 3 months. (How are you going to fuel the generator when your normal supplier tells you they cannot get it? Or have multiple sources of fuel when everyone is trying to get it too? You have planned for that, right?)
- Telephone and Internet – 1 to 3 months. (How will you communicate with your staff? Do you remember that two-way radio system that was junked in favor of cellular phones?)



- Freeways – 1 to 3 years. (That is for our local I-5, I-90, and I-405. How are you going to get around? How is your staff going to get to work?)

I recently read a local broadcast station's emergency plan and a couple of things were clear to me:

- The writer wrote the plan for something other than a mega quake
- They assumed the Engineering Department would be able to fix anything.
- The writer has a serious denial problem – or simply does not grasp the reality of what they must be prepared for.

Bottom line: are you, and/or your station ready today – right now – to stay on the air and serve a community after a major disaster?

This is the time to think about it, now while everything is running normally. Once the disaster hits, it will be too late, and instead of community service there will be a lot of dead air.

*A frequent contributor to **The BDR**, Clay Freinwald is a veteran engineer in the Seattle market. He continues to serve clients from standalone stations to multi-station sites. You can contact Clay at K7CR@blarg.net*

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