

Rehearsing an Emergency Plan

Small Community Water System



New Hampshire Administrative Rule Env-Dw 503.21 (Emergency Plans for Community Water Systems) requires all community water systems to have an emergency plan. Creating an effective plan is a several-step process. Maintaining an effective plan is a continuous process of which annual updates and plan rehearsals are integral parts.

The purpose of this document is to describe a generalized process and different methods of rehearsing an emergency plan at a small community water system. Emergency Plan rehearsals (i.e. exercises) are not required under Env-Dw 503.21; however, rehearsing a plan is a valuable tool for developing a strong and effective emergency plan. NHDES recommends that a small water system rehearse its plan every year, if not more often, especially if there have been changes to staff members, policies, procedures or contact information.

What is an Exercise?

An exercise is a practice activity that creates a simulated emergency situation where participants must react in the capacity that would be expected of them in a real event.

Ask yourself the questions about your water system in the event of an emergency: Is there a good notification system in place if there is a Boil Order? Are the contacts listed in the plan up-to-date with names, positions and phone numbers? Is there a good description in the plan regarding an alternate power supply? Is the plan effective in explaining how water will be provided to critical users?

Conducting exercises can involve the staff members and local, state and federal officials that would be required to respond to an actual emergency event, such as water system personnel, local officials, local fire officials, law enforcement, local health officials, hospitals, Local Emergency Planning Commissions (LEPC), state agencies (for example, NHDES, Health and Human Services, Bureau of Emergency Management, etc.), and federal agencies.

Why Conduct an Exercise?

Conducting an exercise is helpful in better preparing you for an actual emergency event and can help you develop a more effective emergency plan.

Conducting exercises allows you to:

1. Evaluate a system's ability to execute your emergency plan.
2. Identify weaknesses in your system's operation and correct problems in the plan prior to a real event.
3. Demonstrate the ability for system operator and other personnel to prepare for an actual emergency.
4. Assess effectiveness of policies and procedures.
5. Improve coordination and communications and clarify roles and responsibilities.
6. Evaluate staff performance and gain support from the community.

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An exercise allows for training in areas that are common to all emergencies. Conducting exercises develops and helps strengthen relationships between response teams, ensuring that all response personnel are on the same page.

Types of Exercises

There are many different types of exercises. You can choose the type of exercise that is most appropriate to your system, depending on the time, money, resources and the part of your plan you wish to evaluate.

Orientation Seminar

An overview or introduction designed to familiarize participants with roles, plans, procedures or equipment.

Drills

A coordinated and supervised activity normally used to test a single specific operation or function.

Tabletop Exercise

A facilitated analysis of an emergency situation in an informal stress free environment.

Functional Exercise

A fully simulated interactive exercise that tests the capability of an organization to respond to a simulated event.

Full Scale Exercise

A rehearsal that simulates a real event as closely as possible.

Choose a Scenario to Rehearse

When you are choosing an emergency scenario to rehearse, you will need to first identify potential causes for an emergency. For example, there could be an outsider attempting to threaten the system's cybersecurity; a depletion to the water source affecting the water quantity and quality; or an interruption of service due to a line break. Next, you will need to develop emergency scenarios based on those examples.

Ask yourself the following questions when choosing an emergency scenario to rehearse:

What are the Consequences of the Emergency?

Choosing an emergency scenario that would have dire consequences for your system can help you determine which scenario to practice. You want to be sure that your plan will work as intended for an emergency that could have serious consequences for your system (such as long-term or permanent loss of a source) were it to occur.

How Likely is the Emergency to Occur?

You want to think of emergencies that are likely to occur in your area. For example, a system located near the coast should plan to address the strong likelihood of flooding. You want to be certain that your plan will work as intended for an emergency that is likely to occur.

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How Fast Will You Need to Respond to the Emergency?

All emergencies necessitate a response, but some response actions must be faster than others. A drought can cause an emergency, but the response does not have to be immediate because the impact of a drought occurs well after its start, giving a system time to consider and act.

How Extensive Does Notification Have to Be?

Not all emergencies will require notification to all of their notification groups. For example, if a distribution line breaks from freezing as an emergency scenario, they would have to notify some service/repair contractors, their impacted system users including critical users, but they would not need to notify NHDES as long as it was a normal repair issue where public health was not jeopardized. If pollutants were introduced into their sources, they would have to notify all groups. When choosing an emergency scenario to rehearse, this factor is not as critical as the previous three, but still should be considered.

Evaluation

The final aspect of an exercise is the evaluation of results. This discussion should happen right after the exercise so that it is fresh in everyone's mind. This verifies that goals were achieved, evaluates the need for improvement, and identifies necessary upgrades or corrections. Consider whether more coordination was needed and if protocols were followed. Was the exercise itself an adequate test of the systems plan? Please note this review has no right answer. The purpose of the exercise is not to solve the scenario but to meet the objectives.

Additional Emergency Planning Tools

Check out the NHDES website for more information regarding water system security for other emergency planning and security tools including:

Community Public Water System Emergency Plan Template
Emergency Response Notification and Procedure Card

Questions?

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