



Contributing Author  
John Jones, PE, CCM

## When Disaster Strikes, Will You be on Your Toes or Heels?

Nerves were frazzled on April 27, 2011. It was the third day of what would be known as the “2011 Super Outbreak”— a four-day siege of tornadoes that resulted in an astonishing 359 confirmed twisters touching down in 21 states from Texas to New York. By the afternoon, violent tornadoes in Mississippi and Alabama were destroying everything in their path. Four tornadoes were officially rated as EF5 on the Enhanced Fujita Scale, only the second day in history that there were three or more such tornadoes recorded.

While individuals tend to respond well, even heroically, to disasters like the 2011 Super Outbreak, organizations often struggle to perform in their wake. Once the bell rings, first responders are only as good as their preparation. That is why effective emergency response requires experienced project management, collaboration, and specialized expertise before disaster strikes.

To make sure your organization is ready to answer the call, here is where you should put your focus:

### **MITIGATION— Act before you need to**

Mitigation means quantifying the probability and consequences of an event, and implementing measures where benefits outweigh the costs. When you are vulnerable to a natural disaster, you need the mindset to prepare for that likelihood. Here are some things to think about:

- Flag potential danger. Whether its high water and hurricanes, tornadoes, or earthquakes, identify the main risks and vulnerabilities in your area.
- Assess critical infrastructure and facilities. Conduct a risk assessment of critical infrastructure and facilities that could be impacted (e.g., levees along a river that is known to swell, airplane hangars in areas that may see wind gusts of over 100 mph) and perform

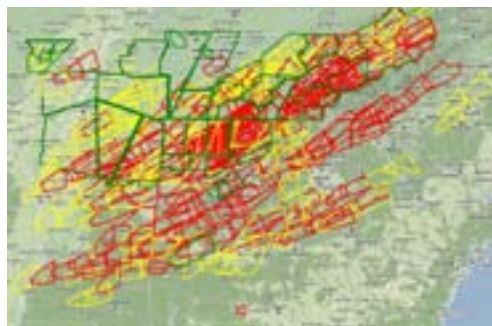


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improvements to help these facilities withstand potential events.

- Secure evacuation routes and storm shelters. If you live in a community of 100,000 people and you know you have six hours to evacuate, do you have the infrastructure to handle it? If a quarter of the population do not or cannot evacuate, how will you provide them with water, food, and medical care?

- Reduce communication burden on emergency responders. What people lack the most in a disaster is timely and accurate information so they can take prudent action themselves. If your emergency responders are constantly on the phone answering questions about where to get water, ice, medication, and other supplies they likely are not dealing with the most urgent situations. One way to work smarter and more effectively and divert these questions away from responders is to create a virtual emergency operation (VEO) website where people can find the latest weather and traffic bulletins, water and ice locations, open drug stores and supermarkets, where they can take their trash, and other information.



Map of tornado warnings in the Southern U.S. on April 27, 2011.

## **PREPAREDNESS— Assume nothing**

Although mitigation can lessen the risk when an event occurs, nothing can eliminate it. Preparedness is having critical programs in place prior to an emergency. It requires many traditional aspects of project management (planning, organizing, coordinating, training, and practicing), but is often applied in non-traditional ways. It takes asking questions that anticipate how, where, and when the dominos will fall—and what challenges could spring up from seemingly nowhere. For example, agencies that must coordinate during an emergency often have significantly different protocols and communication systems, or maybe none at all. How will responders communicate with each other and be unified in their efforts? Questions like these must be answered in advance of an event. Other considerations include:

- Where is the base of operations for this response? Knowing where to meet (and an alternative location just in case) before the event will allow responders to act more quickly.

- How prepared are the other organizations? Training sessions will often answer that question and allow you to make adjustments to your plan.

- Who has the lead on which responsibilities, and how are they coordinating with other leaders? All responders should know who can answer their questions.

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- What will you tell the media? Decide who is authorized to speak to the press and speak with one voice.

- What is your back-up plan if a crew cannot respond? Have an alternate team you can call on, even if they are from farther away.

## **RESPONSE— Who is watching out for the responders?**

If you have adequately trained and practiced for an emergency, the challenge is not what needs to be done when you respond—the team already knows. A big challenge in responding is taking care of the responders. If you can't take care of them, they can't take care of others in need. Although some of these questions may have been answered during the preparation stage, many will not be finalized until you arrive on site.

- Where is your team going to sleep in an area that has just been ravaged by nature?

- Which hotels are still functioning and how are you going to get rooms when everyone is looking for the same thing?

- How and where are you going to feed them and make sure they have water?

- What vehicles will be at their disposal and how are you going to fuel and service those vehicles?

Then, of course, there is the command

and control aspect of response. Do you need 15 or 150 people, and how do you intend to organize that effort and deploy those resources in the most efficient manner possible? Having a scalable plan in place will provide flexibility and be situationally adjustable.

## **LEARNING— Those who ignore history...**

Every crisis presents an opportunity to understand how to improve every aspect of emergency management. Conduct a “plus/change” after an event to document what went as well as could be expected and what could be improved— and integrate those findings into your emergency management strategies. Emergency response is a continually evolving, long-term project. The most important lesson to learn is how to do it better the next time.

