

Cascadia preparedness: Drilling for ‘the big one’

Adam Spencer, Del Norte Triplicate, 5-16-14

At 8 a.m. Monday morning a 9.0 earthquake strikes on the Cascadia Subduction Zone, severely shaking Del Norte County and the rest of the northern West Coast for more than five minutes.

Within a few short minutes, coastal communities are devastated by towering tsunami surges — recorded at 49 feet high in Crescent City — while isolated mountain communities like Gasquet are cut off from normal supply chains of food, power and communication.

In Del Norte, there are 285 civilians killed, 580 civilians injured and at least 8,000 people displaced. Just like in 1964, downtown Crescent City, including City Hall, the police department, the Del Norte County government building, and Del Norte County Sheriff’s Office, have all been completely destroyed.

This hypothetical Cascadia scenario was drilled by state, federal and local emergency agencies this week for the California Office of Emergency Services annual state-level exercise, which drills one specific disaster that is possible in the state each year.

This year the Cascadia threat to Del Norte, Humboldt and Mendocino, as well as Oregon and Washington, took the spotlight since the Cascadia Subduction Zone Earthquake and Tsunami Response Plan was just finalized last year. Emergency agencies are also keen to ramp up for Cascadia since scientists predict there is a 40 percent chance that the quake and tsunami will occur any day in the next 50 years.

“It’s great to be able to get state, fed and locals involved in an exercise so you get input from all three levels. The plan is really just an opportunity. The exercise is where the proverbial rubber hits the road,” said Tomas Kaselionis, a training specialist with FEMA Region IX, who was in Crescent City during this week’s exercise.

‘An eye-opener’

In the drill scenario the earth quaked on Monday and a military helicopter practiced landing in Gasquet on Tuesday, but the exercise really picked up speed Wednesday morning, “Day 3” in emergency response speak, when the Del Norte Emergency Operations Center was activated.

On the far wall of the EOC, based at the Crescent Fire Protection District building, was a sprawl of whiteboards and charts detailing the extent of the damage.

For example: “wastewater treatment plant: destroyed; airport: closed to fixed wing, open to rotary; dispatch/jail: destroyed, back-up dispatch moved to Crescent Fire; # of persons not sheltered: 680; Highway 199 Collier Tunnel: closed (manned-CHP).”

Phones and computers set up in a ready-for-business rectangle were used to triage the needs of the community from medical supplies, food and fuel requests, and search and rescue operations and to document how the rescue and recovery operations were progressing.

Employees and volunteers in neon-colored vests with reflective stripes from all walks of county and city government, as well as sheriff, police, and fire departments, and various volunteers and employees from other

organizations, rushed around the EOC fulfilling the respective roles that they have been trained to do for this type of emergency — or emergency exercise.

Jay Sarina, county administrative officer, was learning to use a web-based system to document the conditions of the county, and valued the practice from the exercise.

“It’s going to end up being extremely beneficial, because if this happened tomorrow and it was the first time we’ve seen this system in action, it would slow us down considerably in completing the task,” Sarina said. “It’s been an eye-opener for me just to deal with this part of it.”

Injecting information

To enforce the reality of the exercise, the EOC was subject to “injects” throughout the day, which are potential requests or pieces of information that an EOC might receive.

For example, a representative from Home Depot walks into the EOC to notify officials that they have six generators capable of powering a large building that are available if needed. The resource is documented with the right section of the EOC in case a request for that item comes in. An inject could be as simple as a command post in Hiouchi notifying that a rock fall at a certain point on Highway 199 has been cleaned up and the route is now open for emergency traffic. The EOC documents the road information on the big wall of whiteboards and on computers and then moved onto the next task.

Cindy Henderson, Del Norte County Emergency Services Manager, crafted 166 injects with a planning team to be unleashed on the EOC throughout the day. Henderson was aware of when the injects would come into the EOC, because she was not being drilled on Wednesday — but her alternatives, Debra Wakefield and Mary Cowart, were.

Another inject involved a person from Sutter Coast Hospital announcing that they need a cache of pharmaceuticals.

First the EOC makes sure that the hospital has exhausted all of the possible local resources, pharmacies like Walgreens and Walmart, before making a state request.

“If they can’t find it then it goes up the chain to the state,” said Cindy Henderson, Del Norte County Emergency Services Manager. “The whole idea is that we deplete everything in Del Norte County and then we go up the chain to the state.”

Kaselionis, of FEMA, said that state and federal emergency managers will be ready to deploy a disaster medical assistance team, a group that can operate a mobile hospital.

How the state and feds would distribute commodities and supplies is likely through multiple centralized “points of distribution” or PODs, which would be supplied by helicopter.