NEMA Holds First of Five Exercises to Update Joint Information System Plan

Public information officers from state agencies met at NEMA to begin a series of five exercises designed to update the standard operating procedures for the Joint Information System and to increase awareness.

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A Message from NEMA Assistant Director

Bryan Tuma

We envision safer, less vulnerable communities in Nebraska made possible through effective collaborative partnerships committed to saving lives and reducing the impact of disasters.

Our mission is to coordinate, support and serve Nebraska through an effective and relevant emergency management agency.

NEMA Staff Reorganization

When the Omaha Public Power District Board voted unanimously to close the Fort Calhoun Nuclear Power Plant last summer, it meant Nebraska Emergency Management Agency needed to evaluate its radiological emergency management (REP) staffing, and our Technical Hazards Section, as well. After evaluation and consideration, the management team at NEMA decided to establish a technical hazards unit within our Preparedness Section, under the management of Nikki Weber. A vacant planning position was eliminated and a unit supervisor, instead of a section manager position, was created. This resulted in cost savings for the agency and aligned with Gov. Pete Ricketts’ goal to reduce spending in state agencies.

In addition, the Technical Hazards Section which has been housed in a separate facility on in Lincoln will now assimilate into the main NEMA office at Joint Forces Headquarters on the Nebraska Air Force Base. Four of the five technical hazards staff members have already moved. Acting Unit Supervisor and State Emergency Response Commission Coordinator Tonya Ngotel, Radiological Planning and Training Specialists Deb Robinson and Nazy Chiniforoushan and Staff Assistant Julie Bergfield have relocated to new offices. Radiological Systems Manager Mike Lofts, and the state calibration lab will move to Joint Force Headquarters by the end of June. Once the lab is moved to a secured location on the base, that will complete the move.
Staff Notes

NEMA hazard mitigation staff participated in, and presented at, two of three Olsson and Associates Funding 101 workshops held in Norfolk, Kearney and Lincoln.

The workshops were designed to inform communities of different funding streams available to pay for a variety of projects.

“The workshops gave local jurisdictions an overview of funding sources that they might need or that fit as a strategic action to mitigate a risk they have identified in their local hazard mitigation plan,” said State Hazard Mitigation Officer Mary Baker.

“In addition to the Olsson workshops, we participated in a similar endeavor hosted by JEO Consultants on Feb. 21, for the South Platte Natural Resources District, as a part of their local hazard mitigation planning process,” Baker said. “The South Platte NRD is about to submit its local plan to the state for initial review prior to NEMA sending it to FEMA for review and approval.”

NEMA Offers Liaison Officer Training

Todd Manns of The Blue Cell, a company that focuses on education and training on incident and emergency management activities, instructs (E-956) All-Hazards Liaison Officer course at Nebraska Emergency Management Agency on Feb. 21. The liaison officer is a member of command staff in the Incident Command System, along with the safety and public information officers. The liaison officer is the conduit for communication between the incident management team and agency representatives supporting the incident.

Molly Bargmann was named unit supervisor for the recovery section. Bargmann previously served as a public assistance program specialist. Now she works with both the hazard mitigation and public assistance staff.

Regan Block joined the recovery section part-time. She is a junior at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln where she is studying construction engineering. She plans to get her masters in civil engineering water resources and wants to work for a nonprofit on clean water initiatives.

Brent Curtis was named administrative assistant III at NEMA and will serve as state watch center supervisor in the Operations Section. Previously, Curtis was a program specialist in the Operations Center. See page 6 for more information on the watch center.

State Hazard Mitigation Officer Mary Baker speaks at a funding workshop hosted by Olsson and Associates in Lincoln.
NRIN ENHANCES Interoperable Communications

From Chadron, to Sidney and on to Nebraska City, responders will soon have access to a statewide network that was designed to improve interoperable communications across the state.

Work on the Nebraska Regional Interoperability Network (NRIN) is continuing to progress at a significant speed across the state, said Project Manager Sue Krogman of Nebraska Emergency Management Agency.

“Local responders can now use statewide communication resources and new, developing technologies by utilizing the transport capabilities that NRIN offers,” Krogman said.

NRIN is a locally-owned IP based microwave network that uses towers across the state to connect public safety answering points (PSAP) and 911 centers.

Krogman describes NRIN as a train track for secure data transmission that runs across Nebraska.

“Local responders can put anything on the train and move it along the network to other parts of the state,” Krogman said. “This system has the capability of connecting places that previous systems were unable to connect.”

“NRIN is a transport system that has the capability of moving data as fast as 100 megabytes per second. It runs at 5(9s) capability, meaning that 99.999 percent of the time there is some sort of redundant connection available.”

The network can transport large amounts of data, radio, voice and video quickly and efficiently in a secure and reliable fashion, Krogman said. “The many circles that are being created are for redundancy. If the “train” runs into a brick wall it just backs up and takes a different route.

NRIN is a point-to-point microwave system and local communities can use it in a variety of ways, including:

- as a primary 911 system like in the East Central Region, Beatrice and Crete,
- with an 800 MHz system to connect radios and provide for remote siren capability like in Cass County,
for long distance video arraignments so prisoners do not have to be transported to other jurisdictions, and

many other uses are being tested.

NEMA manages the grant dollars for NRIN and has been tasked with completion of the build out. The agency contracts, on behalf of local governments, to build out the microwave network at more than 200 tower locations. The pilot portion of this project started in the Panhandle and North Central regions of the state.

NRIN is a federal, state and local collaboration that was designed to improve interoperable communications after the 9/11 attacks. Tasked with finding solutions to failed critical components in the response to a horrendous disaster, the federal government concluded that one of the biggest deficiencies was the inability of first responders to be able to communicate with each other.

Funding for the interoperable communications buildout came from a public safety communications grant (PSIC) that was later amended to create the Interoperable Emergency Communications Grant Program.

Nationally in 2007, the PSIC grant awarded $900 million to assist state and local first responders and public safety agencies for equipment and training.

In 2009, a Nebraska working group was appointed consisting of four local regional representatives and four state representatives.

These representatives created a functional plan based on a high speed network, owned and maintained by local and regional entities.

These eight people spent the next two years putting together a plan for the network. The bid was awarded in 2010, and the group made the decision to start installation in the western part of the state moving east.

Completion is expected in fall 2018 and relies on Homeland Security Grant funds, Krogman said.

“Members of the NRIN board are working diligently with local county and village boards to continue the installation in the eastern part of the state.” Krogman said. “The board is cognizant of the costs of tower leases and rents, therefore installation in the eastern part of the state will be done on water towers or on city or county owned towers as a cost-saving measure.”

The NRIN governance board handles all the various components of the network including committees on quality of service, advertising, outreach, administration and sustainment.

“NRIN provides a great opportunity for response agencies and local government to transport data,” said NRIN Board Chairman Tim Hofbauer of Platte County Emergency Management. “NRIN is allowing counties to provide a dispatch function for other counties. It is providing information from western Nebraska to eastern Nebraska and vis-a-verta.”

It has been a cost-savings for local governments across the state, Hofbauer said. “In the East Central Region, we are saving probably $4,000 to $8,000 a month by using NRIN for our 911 system.”
Work has continued on development of a state watch center at NEMA with the selection of Brent Curtis as supervisor of the center, and the hiring process for a program specialist to work in the center underway.

“We are continuing to scale up the state watch center to full functionality,” Curtis said. “We have identified our next steps and have begun physically reconfiguring the communication room into the watch center. Additional work stations will be added in the next month and interviews for a program specialist to work in the watch center will begin soon.”

NEMA assistant director Bryan Tuma said the watch center will focus on the all-hazards threat environment and will tie the planning and response capabilities of state government to the preparedness measures adopted for the State of Nebraska.

“I see the watch center serving in a coordination role by ensuring a common understanding of the situation is shared by all relevant state agencies and key stakeholders,” Tuma said.

Curtis has begun sending daily briefing emails which include an overview of current imminent or expected conditions across the state and the impact those conditions may have on public safety and infrastructure in the state.

“These briefings are currently being distributed to local emergency managers, our state emergency support coordinators and members of state leadership and other identified public safety stakeholders,” Curtis said. “Our goal in sending out the daily briefing is to create a common operating picture for our federal, state and local partners in public safety.

“Hopefully by providing this information to them it will foster the spirit of enhanced communication between all levels.”

As part of the transition to the watch center, NEMA is working on evolving its duty officer system to better align it with the mission of NEMA, and its partners.

“Our goal is to have local entities provide both enhanced information reporting to the watch center and duty officer system and enhanced information gathering by the watch center and duty officers.”

The state watch center is the eyes and ears of NEMA in terms of what is going on in the state, Curtis said.

“We’ve seen other states doing this and our watch center is taking the best practices we have observed from FEMA regional operation centers, from other states’ watch offices, such as Florida’s, and from the daily situation reports we have seen several states prepare.”

Information gathering, analysis and reporting is the goal for the watch center.

“It establishes that common operating picture so all partners are looking at the same information,” Curtis said.

Operations Section Manager Earl Imler hopes that the state watch center will mean better statewide situational awareness through enhanced information gathering and reporting.

“We hope we are better able to anticipate local resource needs and respond to those needs in a quicker manner,” Imler said.

The goal is that anytime the State Emergency Operations Center is open the state watch center will work to provide up-to-the-minute information to the SEOC and deci-

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Watch Center Continued

sion makers. In addition, the watch center will continue the daily information gathering process for situational awareness for other issues and events across the state.

Curtis said the goal of the state watch center is to grow beyond daily staffing by NEMA personnel to include information gathered from other agencies and departments including the Nebraska National Guard, Nebraska State Patrol and other agencies with pertinent information.

“So far, the response we have received from federal, state and local agencies has been resoundingly positive,” Curtis said. “Our next step really is to enhance those lines of communication with state and local entities.”

To improve the process, Curtis said that means he will be talking with local emergency managers about the watch center and will gather information on how they think NEMA can provide them with better information and a faster state response.

As the next step, Curtis will be speaking at the Nebraska Association of Emergency Management annual conference in Columbus on April 6.

“Getting information out to our local, state and federal partners will get everyone on the same page and make sure we’re all ready when the next disaster strikes,” Curtis said.

Public Information Officers Work to Update Joint Information Center Plans

More than 40 public information officers from Nebraska state agencies participated in the first of a series of five exercises designed to update standard operating procedures for the Nebraska Joint Information Center (JIC).

Nebraska Emergency Management Agency is hosting the series that also focuses on familiarizing all potential JIC staff with the incident command system and operational procedures of the Nebraska JIC.

“This was the first time non-code agency PIOs were included in Joint Information Center training,” said NEMA PIO Jodie Fawl. “They were more than willing to help in the event disaster strikes the state.”

In this seminar and workshop NEMA staff gave an overview of the Joint Information System, ICS and the JIC.

The PIOs also worked in groups to develop position checklists for JIC staff.

The Nebraska Risk Communication Cadre gave a presentation on message-mapping and the PIOs worked in groups to create key messages for use in the event of an emergency.

Quarterly call downs are planned to test the notification system that will be used in the event of and emergency. Additional exercises are scheduled in April, July, October and will culminate with a functional exercise of the plan in Feb. 2018.
Exercise and Evaluation Course Held in Auburn

Nebraska Emergency Management Agency offered the Nebraska Homeland Security Exercise and Evaluation Program (HSEEP) class Feb. 15-16, in Auburn. The introductory-level, two-day course provides a comprehensive overview of exercise design along with practical skill development in accordance with the HSEEP doctrine. The course used activities to give participants an opportunity to interact with many of the templates and other materials to ensure exercises are conducted in a consistent manner. Roger Conrad and Sean Runge of NEMA were instructors.

Photos by Sean Runge

FEMA’s Youth Preparedness Council Seeks Next Year’s High School Students to Serve

Youth across the nation have the opportunity to make a difference and transform the resilience and preparedness of their communities and beyond. Students in eighth through 11th grade who have engaged in community service, or who are interested in emergency preparedness, are encouraged to apply to serve on the U.S. Department of Homeland Security’s Federal Emergency Management Agency’s (FEMA) Youth Preparedness Council.

Formed in 2012, the council engages members in local and national emergency preparedness projects. Over the course of a two-year term, members represent the youth perspective on emergency preparedness and share information with their communities. They also meet with FEMA on a regular basis to provide ongoing input on strategies, initiatives and projects throughout the duration of their term.

Adults working with youth or emergency management are encouraged to share the application with youth who might be interested in applying.

Applicants must submit a completed application form, two letters of recommendation, and academic records.

Applications are due March 31, 2017. For more information and to see the projects current members are working on, visit the Youth Preparedness Council website. To submit an application, visit the application website.
The village of Ayr in Adams County received a state disaster proclamation on Feb. 8 for storms that struck the area, Aug. 28, 2016. The Crystal Lake Recreation area, which is owned, operated and maintained by the village of Ayr sustained damages as a result of heavy rains and flooding. Road, electrical and park structure damage exceeded the village’s ability to recovery, said NEMA Recovery Section Manager Donny Christensen. The village submitted its request through Adams County Emergency Management. Damage was identified to NEMA and eligible damages were identified for reimbursement. “State disasters are less common due to higher cost thresholds for local entities to be eligible,” Christensen said. “It’s not a quick and easy process.” County emergency managers should be kept informed of significant events occurring in their counties so appropriate measures may be taken.

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“The focus will be on outlining the template and meeting with key stakeholders and potential contributors to garnish support and feedback,” Baker said. “In 2018, we will combine the content and hopefully have the final product ready to go to FEMA by Dec. 31, 2018.” A mitigation survey queried emergency management staff across the state on sirens and their age and location, as well as tornado safe rooms. “We hope to use the outdoor warning siren information to better prioritize where we put our funding for the next disaster as well as to create a database that the EM PET regions can also use to repurpose sirens that are older but still in working order,” Baker said. “The safe room information is leading into other educational outreach topics and other project ideas for the future, as well as an opportunity for us to learn where there are potential safe rooms that we may or may not have assisted with funding,” Baker said. “This is our attempt to ensure the local volunteer fire departments and emergency management staff know where people might be, following a disaster.”