

RURAL & SMALL UTILITY SYSTEMS

mutual aid Brings Relief

By Dan Knupp

Utility systems in Kansas have had a rough road over the past 18 months. Biting winter blizzards caused widespread power outages, quick-hitting floods slammed eastern Kansas cities and storms on May 4 spawned the F-5 tornado that leveled the city of Greensburg. These disasters exacted heavy tolls on systems across the state.



mutual aid network for Kansas," Jackson said. "KRWA has always provided training and technical assistance to rural water districts and communities. But with seemingly regular occurring disasters, the association's staff has provided much of the necessary coordination to restore water and wastewater services. As for Greensburg, as far as we could see, it was to be no different. The day after the tornado, we couldn't get any official emergency management attention—phones were answered by voicemail, and with beefed-up security in Greensburg, we couldn't even get into town to talk with anyone."

Saving Greensburg

On May 9, 2007, five days after the tornado, Bill Callaway of the Kansas electric utility mutual aid group Kansas Mutual Energy Agency (KMEA) and city staff asked KRWA to coordinate the help for Greensburg's water and wastewater systems. KDEM officials provided a mission number to KRWA later in the day.

Callaway, manager for the Clay Center, Kansas Board of Public Utilities, had major concerns regarding restoring water for drinking and fire protection. With tornadoes still passing through south-central Kansas, power for communications and tornado-warning sirens was a top priority.

"A half dozen water teams with tools and heavy equipment from our KMEA electric mutual aid communities were locating and marking valves," Callaway said. "Our nine mutual aid power teams were working on power lines to the only surviving water well and an important communications tower. Two emergency management officials raced up, asked for an assessment, then ordered, 'Desist in what you're doing; we need power for streetlights at the courthouse where we're setting up our headquarters!' I knew right then that we needed KRWA and other utility people working together on disaster planning as well as utility restoration. I think that KDEM should look to utility professionals for utility damage assessment and decisions on restoration of utility services after a disaster."

The electric system mutual aid member water crew continued with its locates and valve work under Jackson's direction while other association staff began pounding in blue-painted fence posts and marking meters and hydrants under the tons of debris that covered every street and curb in town. Also rolling up their sleeves and assisting in water restoration work were Kansas Department of Health & Education (KDHE) Chief of Public Water Supply Dave Waldo and others from the primacy agency staff.

KRWA's previous tornado disaster experience in the city of Hoisington, Ks., in 2000 demonstrated that money and time can be saved if infrastructure can be marked so that public works debris teams do not do major damage with heavy equipment, Jackson said. More importantly, when there is upfront input from utility people to the plan, communication to public works removal teams can make them aware so they can be on the lookout for critical infrastructure.

The Greensburg Incident Command management structure identified four priority water needs locations,

Critical emphasis on emergency preparedness brought on by Hurricane Katrina and 9/11 had Kansas Rural Water Association (KRWA) staff member Jim Jackson meet with Kansas Department of Emergency Management (KDEM) officials in Topeka, Ks. The agenda was to finalize months of work to initiate a mutual aid network for water and wastewater system assistance to communities after a disaster.

Less than nine hours after the meeting, Greensburg would lay in total ruin, with nearly a dozen lives lost and scores injured. Lessons to be learned during cleanup and restoration of services would generate questions from organizations and utility professionals from across the state.

"Subsequent mutual aid planning group discussions including the Greensburg experiences have radically changed the look of the planned water and wastewater

Disaster response lessons
from Greensburg, Ks.

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one on each side of town. KRWA and the mutual aid water teams isolated, flushed and disinfected lines serving the requested areas of town, eventually making a water service loop around the city. There is still much to be done as residents and businesses move back into the city. Hydrants and meters need to be repaired or replaced, other city well houses need to be rebuilt or repaired

and wells must be brought back online.

Collaboration is Key

Following Greensburg's lead, an alignment of utilities began developing a new state mutual aid utility plan. A water, wastewater and gas service plan, rolling all three utilities into one, became a plan goal for the new partners.

The two working partners, Kansas Municipal Utilities (KMU) and KRWA, both have a training staff and technical employees. KMU is a statewide association representing Kansas cities and other public or nonprofit agencies involved in the ownership and operation of municipal utilities. Supporting partners taking part in planning discussions include: the Kansas Section of the American Water Works Association, Kansas Corporation Commission, Kansas Department of Health & Environment, KDEM and the Kansas Water Environment Association.

Several factors helped steer KRWA and KMU on the same course. First, the Federal Emergency Management Agency stopped reimbursing assistance expenses without prior written agreements. Also, many small communities have the same personnel working with or managing all of a city's utilities. Often the different utilities share the same heavy equipment.

KMU Government Relations Director Brad Mears said: "A major disaster can quickly outstrip a small community's resources. Having a database is critical for knowing the availability of both human resources and equipment. Our thinking is that our inventory database will be made available both online and as a computer disc—a responder can jump in a truck, head out and take the disc or print out the material as needed."

"The success of Kansas' electrical utility mutual aid group in Greensburg drove home the need for organized water, wastewater and gas service disaster assistance," Mears added. "Providing significant training gives responders the confidence that will ensure the level of response needed when disaster strikes."

Natural Expansion, Shared Goals

The group is past the planning phase and into the plan implementation process. "The Kansas Corporation Commission, whose commissioners oversee gas service utilities in Kansas, provided a grant to us for work on a mutual aid plan for gas utilities," said KMU Executive Director Colin Hansen. "It has been natural to expand involvement to include water and wastewater utilities, and we look forward to working with KRWA on the project. We expect final implementation to be finished by the second quarter of 2008 and being able to respond to disaster calls at that time."

Utility professionals that have unique perspectives on service now also have a shared goal to provide state-of-the-art disaster training for all public utility disaster responders in Kansas. This will ensure a seat at the state disaster-planning table, that phone calls will not go unanswered and that critical time will not be lost in providing citizens of member communities the life-saving assistance they deserve. **WWD**

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