

DISASTERS DON'T PLAN AHEAD...WEROC DOES

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When most people think about an emergency or a disaster, visions of law enforcement, firefighters, and medical personnel come to mind. While those first responders are critical to protecting public health and safety, there are others who keep the community safe behind the scenes.

Think of it as a theatrical play. Police, firefighters, and paramedics are the actors on stage that everyone comes to see. Water and wastewater workers are the stage and production crews working silently in the background. No one thinks about them or realizes they are there. Unless something goes wrong.

Emergency preparedness and security are of paramount importance to the reliability of clean, safe drinking water and effective wastewater management. The protection of public health and safety is the top priority for water and wastewater agencies who serve Orange County — our critical resource affects everything and everyone.

The Water Emergency Response Organization of Orange County (WEROC) is responsible for protecting 3.3 million Orange County residents through the resiliency and reliability of the county's water and wastewater agencies. WEROC builds, improves, and sustains the County's ability to prepare for, respond to, and recover from threatened or actual natural disasters, acts of terrorism, and other man-made disasters. Efforts to mitigate these threats have increased significantly in the last 20 years, and through these expanded efforts, the probabilities of existing hazards such as earthquakes, floods, and wildfires are now recognized.

The threat of terrorism and cyber-attacks have also challenged water and wastewater agencies like never before. Climate change effects are producing extreme weather occurrences including severe rain events or lack of rainfall leading to a drought. The potential for more significant wildland fire incidents, winter storms, extreme heat incidents, and coastal storm surges are imminent. Considering the potential impacts and challenges disasters pose on our water and wastewater infrastructure, the need for planning and mitigating against these threats has an undeniable return on investments.

Concurrently, expectations for local government services have also risen because residents and businesses are increasingly dependent upon collective infrastructure, utility services, transportation, and information systems. And so, the federal government is urging local governments to adopt a culture of preparedness. This standard is no different for the water and wastewater agencies, as demonstrated with more stringent federal regulations, such as the American Water Infrastructure Act of 2018. Local governments are expected to increase



preparedness resources, mitigate and harden infrastructure, and stand ready to address their own needs following a disaster without state or federal assistance.

To carry out its mission, WEROC provides essential resources, training, and exercises to its 37 member agencies and coordinating partners throughout the County and State. The program takes an active role in engaging trained Emergency Operations Center (EOC) staff and maintaining two EOC's used to coordinate emergency response operations during large-scale disasters. Providing assistance and resources between agencies quickly and efficiently is the baseline to getting our critical infrastructure back online.

As recent fires, floods, and the impacts from COVID-19 have reminded us, the cost of living in paradise is, nothing is certain. However, we can identify potential disasters and ensure we are prepared to meet potential challenges. WEROC will continue its efforts towards building a culture of preparedness, and is eager to continue its work to strengthen the critical water and wastewater systems that Orange County communities rely on.

The WEROC program is administered by the Municipal Water District of Orange County and supported by Orange County water providers and wastewater agencies. To register for notifications regarding Orange County emergencies and local disasters, visit www.AlertOC.com.

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