

Site-wide exercises prepare Hanford for emergencies

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Some say that those who are most thoroughly prepared for emergencies are those who perform best under duress. The rationale is that, if an individual or group has been prepared through frequent emergency drills, when a real emergency occurs the individual or group will rely on training and operate almost subconsciously. They will block out any feelings of panic and focus completely on the job at hand.

This is why the Department of Energy Richland Operations Office, the Office of River Protection and Hanford contractors conduct emergency preparedness drills regularly involving various organizations and facilities on site.

In addition to these frequent drills, Hanford's Emergency Preparedness group conducts a full-scale, site-wide emergency exercise each year, featuring scenarios designed to involve facility emergency response organizations, other field personnel and representatives of several off-site agencies.

The annual exercise takes months to plan and is built around a fictional catastrophic event taking place at a facility on site, with an accompanying "plot" that plays out over the course of an entire day.

The goal is to assess how personnel react in a crisis and test everything from fire and rescue response to how the site's communications specialists deal with hordes of actors playing the roles of reporters, concerned citizens and employees.

Emphasis is placed on carrying out the exercise in a safe manner. Safety considerations include high temperatures and the deployment of large emergency response equipment.

After the facility declares the emergency, the scenario continues with the Patrol Operations Center implementing protective actions at and around the event scene. The Occurrence Notification Center notifies off-site agencies, and the Emergency Operations Center, or EOC, in the basement of the Federal Building is activated.

Inside the EOC, people staff telephones and capture the latest data from the event scene on large computer screens. At the same time, the Joint Information Center, or JIC, the communications center of the EOC, begins operations to alert and update Hanford employees, the media, the public

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A "doctored" photo of an imaginary tornado lends realism to an emergency exercise.

How to respond to a Hanford emergency

If you discover an emergency, such as a fire, leak, spill, medical emergency or transportation accident, call 911 from all phones on the Hanford Site — or, if you're using a cellular telephone, call 373-3800 for the Patrol Operations Center.

Provide the following:

- The nature of the emergency
- The location
- Your name
- A call-back number

Do not hang up until you're instructed to do so. Remain a safe distance from the scene, but near enough to direct a crew to the emergency.

In addition, report all adverse conditions to your manager immediately. If you're unsure or don't know the proper response to an on-site emergency, ask your manager. Safety is everyone's responsibility, but managers and supervisors have additional responsibilities for protecting the health and safety of their employees in both normal and emergency situations.

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and off-site agencies. While all of this action takes place, evaluators assess responder performance while logging their observations.

Other observers

Other independent observers are also invited to witness the drill. In this year's exercise, held June 21, observers included members of Japan's Nuclear Energy Cabinet, along with their equivalent of our Secretary of Energy. Also present were members of the Fort Lewis Army National Guard and the Defense Nuclear Facilities Safety Board.

Information continues coming in from the event scene. In this case the accident scenario entails a fire, possibly two, at the Waste Encapsulation and Storage Facility. There is word of injuries as well.

Throughout the day, as information comes in, it becomes apparent there were two fires, an injury and a fatality. Although it's an unpleasant thought, a fatality is always a possibility in an industrial accidents.

Because of that possibility, the Franklin County Coroner is a participant in the exercise, along with a score of medical personnel.

By mid-day, the event status is officially upgraded because of the severity of the accident and airborne radiological releases. The upgraded status, in turn, means a mandatory, precautionary evacuation of Columbia River traffic from the Vernita Bridge to Leslie Groves Park in Richland.

Local county emergency management officials stationed in the EOC have the responsibility of communicating with their EOCs regarding affected off-site populations.

Detailed, realistic

Every detail of the exercise accident scenario has been thought out — even the production of mock photos from the accident scene. The exercise also includes at least one news conference featuring actors portraying reporters and questioning the spokespersons for DOE, the site contractors and off-site agencies.

Another feature tested during this year's exercise was the first-time use of live video streaming from the accident scene via the Internet. "The use of real-time video will greatly enhance the ability of those coping with an emergency," said Guy Schein of the DOE-RL Office of Intergovernmental, Public and Institutional Affairs. "A wall-sized display of the accident being projected via a computer screen in the EOC will enable our EOC responders to visualize much more rapidly the event scene and provide more timely information to the public and the media." The video streaming trial was a success, according to Schein, and the intent is to have it available next fiscal year.

After the exercise was officially terminated, site Emergency Preparedness staff members began compiling exercise evaluation information to use as part of the official report and a lessons-learned document. According to the exercise report, noteworthy practices included the safe conduct of this very complex exercise; event scene responders promptly recognizing event indicators that led to timely declaration of the emergency; and teamwork and good drillmanship demonstrated at all locations throughout the exercise.

Gary Loicano, acting director of DOE-RL Security and Emergency Services, complimented the emergency response staff members for their use of procedures and their commitment, dedication and teamwork. ♦



In the June 21 site-wide emergency exercise, this composite photo was used to show emergency responders and the actors who portrayed reporters what the simulated emergency was all about.