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Gulf Coast disasters point to need for new thinking on shelters, evacuations, initial response

By: DAVE DOWNEY - Staff Writer

Riverside County is better prepared to weather a crippling catastrophe than New Orleans was, experts say, but Hurricane Katrina exposed weaknesses in local disaster response plans.

"One fatal flaw in all of our planning that was really brought to the forefront by Katrina is that all of our plans are based on the first responders being local officials," said Ross Grayson, director of environmental health and safety at UC Riverside. First responders are those who arrive at the scene of emergencies to provide first aid. They include firefighters, paramedics and police officers.

"We have not dealt with the fact that first responders will (also) be victims in a catastrophic event," Grayson said.

Marc Weidenmier, an economics professor at Claremont McKenna College in Los Angeles County, agreed.

"If there is a major disaster in California and your first responders are wiped out, you're in trouble," Weidenmier said. "That's what happened in New Orleans."

In New Orleans, nearly 250 police officers ---- 15 percent of the city's force ---- left their posts to rescue their families from flooded homes, and were not available to help out in the unfolding crisis that submerged the Mississippi River delta metropolis, according to news reports.

For example, if a disaster of catastrophic size, such as a magnitude-8 earthquake, were to hammer Riverside County, it is likely that local police, fire and emergency officers would be prevented from rendering aid. It is likely that residents would have to rely on help arriving from another region ---- and perhaps as far away as Northern California, Grayson said.

While California's mutual-aid system would trigger a response from elsewhere in the state, he said, it could take a day or two ---- or more ---- for help to arrive, and plans should take that into consideration.

Under mutual aid, a system California pioneered a half-century ago, neighboring agencies automatically help each other if one is overwhelmed by a fire, quake or flood it cannot handle by itself.

### A wake-up call

"We need to rethink a lot of our planning," Grayson said. "We have done a lot of preparation, but this woke us up to the fact that we need to do a lot more. Katrina in particular, but even Rita to a lesser extent, was a wake-up call for all emergency planners."

In the case of Hurricane Rita, whose approach triggered the evacuation of Houston, America's eighth-largest

metropolitan area, it became clear that evacuating a large swath of Southern California could be disastrous in and of itself, Grayson said. Even with plenty of advance warning, Texans found themselves in 14-hour traffic jams in searing heat, running out of gas. Some collapsed on the way out of town.

Grayson said one can only imagine what would happen if hundreds of thousands tried to leave Riverside County --- in a panic --- to find shelter after an earthquake flattened numerous homes and some highways. Traffic is bad enough on a normal day, with all freeways open, he said.

Houston, with its metro-area population of 5 million, is much larger than Riverside County, which is home to 2 million people. However, Riverside County is just part of the world's most densely populated regions ---- Southern California is home to 20 million ---- and county residents would find plenty of company on the freeways.

Not to mention that the Inland Empire's freeway capacity has increased by just one-third in the last two decades, while traffic volume has tripled, according to a May report by the Texas Transportation Institute.

In short, Grayson said, a large-scale evacuation of Southern California is just not feasible.

"There simply is not a workable model for that," he said. "We are 40 years behind on our transportation infrastructure. We can't fix that with a plan."

Indeed, said Mark Dennis, a spokesman for Lake Elsinore, there may be no way out if a quake of the size that demolished San Francisco a century ago struck somewhere near the southern end of the San Andreas fault. California's most famous seismic fault line runs from San Francisco to the Salton Sea, and traverses much of Riverside County.

"If the Big One hit, we could potentially be talking about Ventura to the border being impacted, in terms of major freeways," Dennis said.

As a result, most of the displaced residents would have to be sheltered and cared for locally, experts say.

### **Not enough**

Riverside County and the local chapter of the American Red Cross have extensive plans for sheltering disaster victims that rely on schools and churches, said Bonnie Reed, program supervisor for the county Office of Emergency Services.

Temecula would house up to 8,000 in its four high schools and Murrieta 5,000 in high schools and community centers. If necessary, cities could house more evacuees. Aaron Adams, senior management analyst, said Temecula, for example, could shelter up to 26,000 if all schools' gymnasiums were brought into service.

Still, those plans may not be enough.

Reed said schools and churches would not have enough room for all displaced residents in a major disaster. She said officials need to look beyond traditional shelter venues and incorporate spacious warehouses, county-owned buildings, city-owned structures and convention centers into their plans.

"We need to identify those places where we could put large numbers of people," Reed said.

At the same time, Murrieta fire Chief Phil Armentrout said people need to realize that a major disaster could knock out many available shelters and render impassable the roads that lead to them. Consequently, he said, they need to prepare to, if necessary, "shelter in place."

Rather than getting stuck on a paralyzed freeway to nowhere, it may be best to stay home, shut off the gas and electricity, and hunker down for a few days, Armentrout said.

"Preparing yourself to be able to stay at home is by far the best thing anyone can do," he said.

Authorities long have recommended taking steps to be self-sufficient for three days. In the wake of Katrina, officials are now saying that is not long enough.

## **A whole week**

"It is critical that individuals prepare themselves, their families and their neighborhoods for the likelihood of being without services for up to one week," said Mary Moreland, the county's emergency services director.

In the case of commuters, they should prepare for the possibility of hunkering down near, or at, workplaces if the Big One hits in the middle of the workday, experts say. For instance, those 30,000 residents who travel south into San Diego County for jobs may have no choice but to stay put, apart from their families, if a major shaker were to knock out a bridge on Interstate 15 south of Temecula.

An alternative route might be available, by way of Julian and Highway 79 or Orange County and the Ortega Highway (Highway 74), officials said. Even so, either of those would take commuters many miles out of the way and they have limited vehicle capacity, and getting home would take many hours, if not days.

"In a worst-case scenario, if the road's out, you're not going to get home," Armentrout said.

Gary Bonelli, a spokesman for the San Diego Association of Governments, a regional planning agency, said San Diego County officials have thought about that scenario and are prepared to shelter Southwest Riverside County commuters.

Conversely, on the other side of the county line, Riverside County stands ready to shelter weekend visitors to area lakes and mountains who are unable to return to homes in San Diego, Orange and Los Angeles counties, Reed said.

Riverside County and area cities have disaster response plans they are supposed to call on when a quake, flood or wildfire strikes. Some are newer and some are older.

The county's was adopted in 1998. It still refers to nuclear "fallout shelters," products of the Cold War that no longer exist. Reed said the county has almost finished a rewrite that officials will deliver to the Riverside County Board of Supervisors in November.

## **Who's in charge?**

Temecula's plan is five years old. Murrieta adopted one in August 2003.

"The meat of the (Murrieta) plan revolves around, if a disaster strikes, who takes over and who does what," Armentrout said. "It's a checklist of actions they (city officials) are supposed to take. Everybody has a role."

In the case of the county, a 3-inch-thick document titled the "Multi-Hazard Functional Plan," specific officials are given specific tasks. The county fire chief is in charge of rescue operations, the sheriff is responsible for evacuations, the building and safety director is expected to clear debris and repair critical roads, and the social services director is supposed to oversee the housing and care of evacuees.

The county executive officer ---- currently Larry Parrish ---- is the "disaster corps commander" that everyone answers to.

County officials maintain that the plan's clarity, coupled with California's unified command structures that are designed to coordinate responses from a variety of agencies, would help them avoid the confusion and paralysis that prevailed in New Orleans in the aftermath of Katrina.

"California is much more sophisticated in our coordination, in our planning and in our response than what I saw in Louisiana," Armentrout said. "If we needed to, we could mobilize hundreds of fire engines with thousands of firefighters, and we could do it very rapidly."

Reed expressed similar confidence.

"We already had an advantage over New York and Louisiana," Reed said. "We have the ability to call in resources and get them in quickly."

Reed and Armentrout were referring to California's mutual aid system, through which neighboring cities and

counties automatically respond to help each other out in disasters rather than wait to be called.

Besides that, officials say extensive plans are in place to keep lines of communication open. For starters, there is the well-established Emergency Alert System that would be used to broadcast specific directions to residents over radio and television air waves.

### **Practice makes perfect**

Then there is the "reverse 911" system that Riverside County proposes to put in place by spring 2006, Moreland said. Under the system, emergency messages would be delivered to families on a wide scale over telephone lines. She said the county also works closely with amateur radio operators.

"They can get through when all else fails," Moreland said.

Adams said Temecula has thought long and hard about the need for communication.

"If we go down and have no phones, no computers and no cell phones, we are still going to be able to communicate," Adams said, saying hand-held radios linked to a citywide network of repeaters would be called into action.

Murrieta's Armentrout said the city has five so-called Community Emergency Response Teams, groups of 20 to 30 volunteers from neighborhoods such as The Colony and Bear Creek who are trained in first aid, CPR, search and rescue, and damage assessment. Similar teams are in place in other communities.

Riverside County and California are serious about planning for disasters, said Steve Frates, a public policy analyst at Claremont McKenna College's Rose Institute of Local Government, and they have "a history and culture of getting things done."

Conditions here are different than in Louisiana, which was crippled by its "history and culture of ineptitude and corruption in local and state government," Frates said. "Everyone is whining about FEMA (the Federal Emergency Management Agency). But it's the locals who have to have the plan and execute. They blinked and didn't do anything."

Frates maintained that that kind of paralysis would not occur in California. Besides having unified command mutual aid systems, he said, the state has been tested over and over, he said.

Said Moreland: "We live in a disaster-prone state, and our state learns from each disaster and works to improve the response and recovery process after every event."

Still, said Weidenmier, the Claremont economics professor, it remains to be seen how the county's and California's systems would function in a catastrophe of the magnitude that brought New Orleans to its knees.

"Any time you are talking about multiple agencies dealing with a crisis, history tells us that there are always problems," Weidenmier said. "It just doesn't work perfectly, and the more agencies you have, the more difficult it is. The real test will be when a major one comes here."

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