

## **Not My Fault: Thankful for our hard-working emergency managers**

Lori Dengler/For the Times-Standard

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It's the time of year for gathering with friends and family and appreciating what we have and what we share. At the top of my list - family, friends and community.

I am lucky to have ended up on the North Coast. I first arrived at Humboldt State University in 1978, with a one term temporary teaching position. Two years later my luck continued and my job became permanent. My advisers at UC Berkeley thought it a poor choice. The UC folks considered the State system a big step down from the lofty halls of Berkeleydom. They said I was throwing away my career.

As fate would have it, the move to Humboldt offered opportunities I wouldn't have had elsewhere. Not only was the department growing and my colleagues terrific, it was a scientifically important time and the North Coast was in the thick of it. Paleoseismology provided windows into the study of ancient earthquakes and every few months a new finding would change our perspective on earthquake and tsunami threats.

Over the years, my career path changed. At first it was straight ahead science – studying earthquake shaking hazards and shallow geophysics. But after the 1992 Cape Mendocino earthquake and the growing awareness of a much larger Cascadia event, I become involved tsunami hazard mitigation at the State and Federal levels and for the first time, found myself working with emergency managers and planners. I had spent years working on the science side of earthquake hazards but had never thought about the process of responding to an actual disaster or the skills required for such a task.

Emergency managers have one of the most difficult of jobs. Most of the time, it's endless paper pushing, applying for grants, revising response plans, filling out the proper forms for the last disaster, begging for support funds, and trying to get people to recognize it's a good idea to plan and practice BEFORE a disaster strikes. Then comes the rising flood, a shifting fire, the shake in the night, and the call that a real disaster may be on its way. The job of emergency management is to coordinate the response. It includes assessing what happened and is continuing to happen, finding out the situation on the

ground and making decisions as to where to focus scarce resources, documenting every expenditure and every decision made and making sure the political leaders understand what is happening and what their role is.

When asked about his position (New York Times Sept. 9, 2007), Michael D. Selves, a county emergency manager in Kansas, responded "My job is to tell you things you don't want to hear, asking you to spend money you don't have for something you don't believe will ever happen." It's a job that requires being able to think on your feet even when sleep-deprived, communicate with a broad spectrum of individuals and groups, constantly juggle a long list of tasks, and know how to supervise and when to delegate. With the exception of Tommy Lee Jones (Volcano, 1997), it's not an occupation that is featured in popular culture.

No matter how many scenarios you've exercised, each disaster is unique and offers particular challenges. Not all of your team may be able to make it to the Emergency Operations Center, communications are likely to be compromised and other areas are also clamoring for assistance from the state and federal government. I've never been in an EOC in a real emergency but I've gotten a small taste of what is involved in exercises with both Humboldt and Del Norte County emergency professionals. My hat goes off to our county emergency coordinators Dorie Lanni (Humboldt) and Cindy Henderson (Del Norte). Being able to keep your head on your shoulders in the early hours when there is so much uncertainty, and 12, 24, 36 hours later when you are short staffed and even shorter on sleep, requires real dedication.

A common theme from recent emergencies is the frustration over not getting immediate help. I ran a number of surveys in Humboldt County to assess people's expectations in the aftermath of a major earthquake or other disaster. One of the questions was "Who do you think has the primary responsibility for helping people during the first 12 hours after a strong earthquake or other disaster? In 1996, two-thirds of respondents answered "me", or "myself and my neighbors." By the time of our most recent survey in 2013, that number had dropped to 50%. The other half now expected that trained responders would be able to help them out.

This is a discouraging trend. The reality of a disaster is that you will probably be on your own in those first hours and days. So do whatever you can ahead of time to make the job of our emergency managers a little easier. Store supplies, gain first aid skills, organize your neighborhood, sign up for emergency notifications and do what you can

to reduce your vulnerabilities ahead of time – whether from floods, fires, earthquakes or tsunamis. Your emergency managers will thank you.

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