

County Commission Update: It's Time to Get Prepared

By Wade Mathews, Public Information Officer

Experts are calling it the fifth biggest earthquake since 1900. The March 11th earthquake that hit Japan's main island of Honshu measured magnitude 9.0 on the Richter scale. The resulting tsunami wiped out Sendai, Japan leaving death and destruction in the wake of the 30 foot high wall of water. Thousands are dead and thousands more are still missing.

It seems like these natural disasters, especially earthquakes, are occurring with more frequency all over the world. Whether that's really true or not, I don't know. But I do know that when it comes to a major earthquake hitting our state, scientists say it's not a matter of "if," but "when."

Of course, after the Japanese quake everyone is talking about the terrible disaster. Many people are taking notice and starting, or continuing, to get prepared. Commissioner Colleen Johnson said, "People tend to forget about preparedness until the next disaster hits. Emergency preparedness is certainly on people's minds now."

I hope it is on your mind now. The Tooele County Commissioners are concerned for the safety of our citizens and are urging everyone to take steps to become prepared for emergencies and disasters. Commissioner Jerry Hurst said, "Everybody ought to be prepared. Nobody expects these disasters to happen to them, but they do happen. We can't be totally prepared for everything, but we need to do the best we can."

So where do you begin? Emergency Preparedness for any type of hazard begins with a Family Disaster Plan. Your plan should consist of knowing protective actions, designating an out-of-state telephone contact, identifying one family meeting place outside your home and one outside your neighborhood in case of evacuation, creating Disaster Supply Kits for each family member and your vehicles, keeping and rotating water and food storage in your home, keeping your gas tanks at least half full, and knowing emergency plans for your child's school. Include special-needs neighbors and pets in your plans.

In the case of an earthquake, the first thing to know and remember is the protective action: "Drop, Cover, and Hold on." Get under sturdy furniture and hold on until the shaking stops. While the duration of the Japanese earthquake was unusually long, with shaking lasting three to five minutes, most quakes last less than a minute. You don't have time to run around looking for cover. "Drop, Cover, and Hold on" wherever you are, as soon as possible. If you're outside, stay outside, but away from power lines, trees, walls and fences. Don't run out of, or into, a building. The biggest cause of death and injury in an earthquake is falling objects.

This may sound callous but if you don't know how to protect yourself during a natural disaster, it may not matter if you have any other emergency plans and supplies in place. Teach your family and friends to "Drop, Cover, and Hold on" just as much as they know "Stop, Drop, and Roll." Try to stay calm and don't panic during disasters.

Commissioner Bruce Clegg has encouraged citizens to have water stored for emergencies since he first took office. He said, "We live in the high desert and with droughts, power outages, and disasters, you never know when our fresh water supply might be threatened or interrupted. It's important that everyone have food and water storage." Commissioner Johnson agreed, "I think everyone should have water stored in their homes. We can live without food longer than we can live without water."

In April 2003, National Public Radio's Howard Berkes called Tooele County one of the best prepared rural counties in the nation. And we've only improved since then. Tooele County Emergency Management (TCEM) can activate the Emergency Operations Center where officials coordinate, communicate, and collaborate for emergency response and resource needs. TCEM also maintains several warning systems including sirens, highway message boards, tone-alert radios, Emergency Alert System, route alerting, telephone calling trees, Twitter (twitter.com/tcem), and Facebook (facebook.com/tcem.org).

Unfortunately, many of the natural hazards that could affect Tooele County such as an earthquake or tornado will provide little to no warning. When warning is available and during disasters, the warning systems will be utilized to provide emergency public information to help people during the response to, and recovery, from a disaster.

Because we don't know when the next big earthquake will hit our area, we need to get prepared now. Emergency Management Director, Kari Sagers, said, "The best steps you can take to prepare are those you do before the disaster. When the disaster hits, the time to prepare has passed."

There are no guarantees when it comes to surviving a disaster, but if you do all you can to prepare for the worst, then you can hope for the best.

Emergency Preparedness information is available in many forms at the TCEM Building at 15 East 100 South in Tooele. You can consult your 2011 Tooele County Emergency Preparedness Calendar. Information is also available electronically at www.tcem.org. Feel free to call (435) 833-8100 with emergency preparedness questions. As always, send your comments to commissionupdate@co.tooele.ut.us.