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Texas Innovative Practice – SETRPC Radio

SUMMARY

Over 18 years, the Southeast Texas Regional Planning Commission (SETRPC) implemented an interoperable 800-megahertz (MHz) radio system. During Hurricane Harvey, local communities maintained clear and consistent communication as a result of these radio system improvements, even though floodwaters physically isolated them.

DESCRIPTION

Before the implementation of the regional radio system, SETRPC had multiple non-interoperable communication pathways for emergency responders. One of the lessons from the 2005 response to Hurricane Rita was that communication needed to be clear and reliable. Additionally, SETRPC needed to make additional investments in equipment to increase interoperability and reduce coordination barriers. Between FY 2000 and FY 2003, SETRPC made an initial \$6 million investment of local funds to begin working towards communication interoperability. From FY 2005 to FY 2018, SETRPC invested approximately \$37 million in Port Security Grant Program (PSGP) and State Homeland Security Program (SHSP) funds and \$1.8 million in other Federal funds to fully build the infrastructure for the regional radio system.

The regional radio system for SETRPC allowed for uninterrupted emergency communication throughout Hurricane Harvey. The unprecedented flooding for the region disrupted landline communications, 911, and public cell service. The flooding transformed towns into virtual islands, further limiting jurisdictions' abilities to communicate and distribute resources. Moreover, flooding physically cut off SETRPC jurisdictions from the rest of the state as

highways flooded. The regional radio system was the only form of unimpeded communication among jurisdictions during the storm and allowed for communication with state and Federal partners to continue.ⁱ

Specifically, the city of Nederland used the radio system to successfully communicate among responders, enabling them to perform water rescues for the first time ever. Several jurisdictions, including Nederland, Groves, and Vidor, indicated they would have suffered from inconsistent or nonexistent communication during the storm had the regional radio system not been in place.



A cell tower near Beaumont floods during Hurricane Harvey.

SETRPC prioritized efforts to make the entire region P25 compliant, effectively making all radios completely interoperable with one another. As of August 2018, all jurisdictions within the SETRPC are P25 compliant.

“The floods from Harvey turned our cities into islands. The only way we were able to achieve operational coordination between the cities and counties was through our communications. Had it not been for the interoperable communications made possible by both portables and mobile data terminals purchased with DHS funding, we would not have been able to coordinate within the region at all.”

– Chief Dale Jackson, City of Groves Fire Department

REFERENCES

ⁱ FEMA, National Preparedness Assessment Division. Stakeholder Interviews with representatives from Texas. September 2018.

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