

## ***Lead Emergency Responder Organization for Small Community Water and Sanitation Supplies Releases Report on Lessons Learned and Planning Guide for Future Crises***

(Washington, DC) The National Rural Water Association (NRWA), the country's largest community-based water organization released their plan to initiate state emergency response networks – to assist community water and sanitation supplies during emergencies.

The **Rural Water Mutual Aid Agreement and A State Wide Water and Wastewater Utility Emergency Support Network** guide describes actions, measure, approaches, and tactics that were developed based on the NRWA's Emergency Response Committee recommendations and the lessons learned from hurricane emergency responses in Florida, Texas, Mississippi, Alabama, and Louisiana. The plan details how communities can implement the most successful emergency response network to restore safe and clean drinking water & sanitation services during emergencies.

The guide understands that time is a function of success (i.e., delayed response can significantly harm the public). Conducting an in-depth assessment of every water supply (especially in communities with no reported problems) can delay what the communities believed was their immediate pressing need for equipment and technical assistance—to maximize public health protection. To ensure that technical resources are immediately provided to small communities in a crisis, the rural water strategy relies on the existing networks of communities and rural water field staff's unique ability to respond to situations immediately. This was demonstrated hundreds of times during the crises last year in the Gulf States. For example, when Hide-A-Way Lake water supply in Mississippi was left without power immediately after the storm - Bruce DeViller, Hide-A-Way Lake Manager said, *"We were dependent on our aged generator and unfortunately, two days after the storm, the generator failed and attempts to repair it were unsuccessful. Numerous requests to FEMA and government officials for the loan of a generator were met with negative results. Last on our list to call was Mississippi Rural Water Association. Of all that we contacted, the only one to come to our aid was MRWA. Within ten minutes from placing our call, K.T. Newman of MRWA, had made arrangements to provide us a generator. Late Sat., Sept. 3, Mississippi Rural Water came to our rescue having made arrangements with the town of Lonoke, Arkansas for the loan of a generator."*

The guide includes the templates of Texas and Florida Rural Water Associations who have implemented state plans. Additional Gulf states including Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana are in various stages of implementing a plan.

The guide is available on the internet at: [www.ruralwater.org/emergencynetwork.pdf](http://www.ruralwater.org/emergencynetwork.pdf).

### Included with the guide:

- A summary of the established plan in Texas (pp. 15-16)
- Congressional Testimony explaining institutional problems and solutions (pp. 17-22)
- Letters from numerous communities detailing their experiences (pp. 23-29)
- Trade magazine features covering various communities experiences (pp. 30-35)

## Comments from Experts Involved in Crafting and Implementing the Emergency Network

In describing what worked in Mississippi, **Mayor Bill Rutledge (City of Pontotoc, MS and vice president of the MS Municipal League)** said, *“what is needed in this crisis and future crises is immediate access to technical personnel and equipment. Communities know the water is not safe long before it is declared not in compliance, and no one wants to restore safe water more than the local officials. We don’t need someone to tell us we must comply, but rather, we need the help and know-how to fix the problem. What we have witnessed in this relief operation is the necessity of familiarity among the needy and contributing communities. It has been apparent that strangers can’t have the relationship, familiarity, and trust needed to be helpful in an emergency situation. Working with partners in professional associations resulted in access to a network of experts. The Rural Water Circuit Riders were able to use their contacts across the state to acquire parts, plumbers, gas technicians, pipe, etc., that only comes from networking in the association of water and wastewater utilities.”*

**Tom Duck (Texas Rural Water Association)** said, *“we have implemented the plan in Texas to help communities who have limited resources and personnel deal in an emergency. Our network is truly neighbor helping neighbor and geared toward hands-on help versus online database systems which may be good for large water utilities. We will provide direct, onsite assistance to the damaged utility with the goal of getting them up and running immediately. During Rita, we had our field staff on the ground in the disaster area within a matter of hours. We used our staff to do damage assessments, fix leaks, locate and connect power generators and helped systems complete the FEMA paperwork. In addition, our member rural water utilities volunteered manpower, equipment and supplies that we utilized to make all this happen. This is why RWEAC is unique. We learned a lot responding to Rita, but the most important lesson learned was that the people who were the managers/operators of these small water utilities were in shock as to the amount of damage they sustained and for some it was too overwhelming. They needed their peers to be there on-site to provide support in addition to technical support.”*

**Pat Creduer (Louisiana Rural Water Association)** said, *small communities are most in need during times of emergencies because they often have limited technical and emergency resources. That is why we have implemented our Louisiana WARN system to respond to those small communities during crises. Our outreach in the aftermath of Katrina and Rita was the main source of technical and personal support for small communities’ water supplies. You learn a lot when you look into the faces of people that have lost everything, days, weeks and months after hurricanes – they appreciate and count on the help from their peers and neighboring communities.”*

**An example of the point that time is a function of success** – In Louisiana, EPA conducted an in-depth assessment of every water supply (even communities with no reported problems), delaying what the communities believed was the immediate need for equipment and technical assistance. While EPA was just starting their intensive assessment, communities that couldn’t wait were seeking out help where they could get it. In Livingston Parish, a Circuit Rider found much of the parish’s utilities without energy immediately following the hurricane. After coordinating with local officials, including fire officials and parish emergency offices, to target the most severely impacted utilities, the Circuit Rider was able to communicate with those operators via Nex-Tel (there was no phone service). Unable to procure water bladders from any emergency organization, he was able to find approximately 20 water storage tanks and a colleague with a flatbed tow truck and started delivering the filled, water containers to at least seven communities (Port Vincent, Paradise Ponte Island, Springfield, Head of Island, Killian, Bayview, and Vincent Acres). Working around the clock to keep the containers filled (10-hour supply), the pressure in the water systems was maintained.