

## **Tanana Chiefs Conference white paper on 2013 breakup flood issues**

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### **Intro**

TCC has taken an especially active role in disaster response since the breakup floods of 2009 when it appeared that quick action was needed to protect health and safety. During breakup of 2013, major flooding threatened Fort Yukon and devastated Galena from ice jam flooding on the Yukon River. Other villages also flooded to a lesser extent in 2013.

### **Preparedness**

TCC prepares every spring for breakup flooding. A number of staff from different departments are organized into an emergency response team that fills the TCC ICS structure and takes on additional duties during preparation and response. TCC has been better prepared every year, thanks to hard work from the staff, and experience has been gained in several disaster events. TCC preparation includes:

- Making lists of medically fragile patients in each village that may need evacuation in a disaster event
- Coordinating with the State DHS, Red Cross and others (This is a major part of TCC's work in disaster preparation and response)
- Working with the airlines to prepare for evacuation charters
- Purchasing supplies (such as PPE and MREs)
- Keeping staff and management informed through daily internal sitreps created from NOAA products, local reports, and other credible information. This is an important step in our preparedness for breakup flooding.

TCC has made a significant effort over the years to encourage and assist emergency planning at the local level in TCC villages. Several conferences have been organized by TCC for village leaders; the most recent was in the fall of 2013. That conference was well attended, and every tribe went home with the beginnings of a SCERP plan (the State of AK Small Community Emergency Response Plan).

### **Response**

During a disaster response, TCC seeks to do what is necessary to protect the health and safety of village residents in TCC region. TCC has provided the following response during disasters:

- Evacuate medically fragile village residents
- Charter flights to evacuate a village population at large
- Purchase and deliver emergency supplies to villages (MREs, water, radios, etc.)
- Shelter evacuees in the TCC Willow House hotel
- Feed evacuees
- Meet evacuees at the airport and drive them to TCC or Red Cross Shelters, or another residence in town
- Act as a vendor for the State of AK with chartering flights, hotel rooms, etc.
- Coordinate, Coordinate, Coordinate. During the 2013 floods TCC held a daily planning meeting with TCC staff, Red Cross, AK DHS, BIA, and the VOAD. By all accounts, this meeting improved the response of all participating agencies.
- Provide information on our website, Facebook page, and directly to tribal governments
- Setup a dedicated phone extension so that the TCC incident commander can be reached on the company's 1 800 line at any time by village leaders or State staff
- Provide security (VPSOs)
- Provide for health care services in temporary clinic setting to include; staffing, supplies, equipment, pharmaceuticals, behavioral health and patient referrals.

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- Assist in setting up emergency drinking water treatment systems
- Provide small electrical generators
- Provide radios and satellite phones
- Provide 4 wheelers for transportation of key personnel
- Obtain approval from AK DHS whenever possible for expenditures, simplifying reimbursements.

A few examples from 2013 include chartering flights for evacuations from Fort Yukon, Galena, Stevens Village and Hughes; multiple TCC staff met evacuees at the airport anytime day or night and provided ground transportation within Fairbanks

Things that went well in 2013 were the river watch flights and the State incident management teams on the ground in Galena.

### **Recovery**

TCC is engaged in the recovery process, although not to the degree that we are engaged in the response. During recovery, TCC continues to coordinate with the State and FEMA and seeks reimbursement for expenditures during the response. This has gone more smoothly every year since it was begun in 2009. Reimbursements requests are submitted in a timelier manner, and payments are made sooner, although there is still room for improvement. The main tasks TCC takes on during recovery are:

- Seek reimbursements for response expenditures
- Provide maps of lots and realty information, including valuations
- Help tribes w/ project worksheets and reimbursements
- Assist tribes with recovering public buildings and facilities
  - Clinics
  - Water treatment plants
  - Wastewater facilities
  - Landfills

## **Problems:**

### **Planning/preparedness problems:**

The most significant problem and barrier to creating effective plans at the village level is a lack of resources for planning work on the village level. While the SCERP is available from the state, there is still a lack of paid staff at the local level who can lead the SCERP or other planning efforts. If there is a VPSO they can help lead the effort, especially in preparedness, but they do not have the time to do a plan. Also, not every village has a VPSO.

### **Planning/preparedness solution:**

- Provide funding for a local employee that can lead the planning effort.
- Ensure the plan is exercised annually. A VPSO or outside state resource may be the best to assist in organizing plan exercises.

### **Response problems:**

The biggest problem with response efforts has been coordination. Even though coordination has greatly improved with TCC's efforts over the past few years, it was difficult in 2013 due to the number of private

citizens and 3<sup>rd</sup> party aid agencies that participated without coordinating with the state or other responders.

The lack of coordination and number of parties involved made the Galena evacuation very confusing. There were airplanes showing up at the airport full of evacuees that no one knew were coming; evacuees ended up in Fairbanks, other villages, and Anchorage in a very haphazard manner. TCC was ready to charter airliners to get residents out before the airport flooded; however, the State was not willing to authorize those flights because the airport hadn't flooded yet. Much of the confusion could have been prevented if the state had authorized an evacuation sooner.

In summary:

- Lack of communications during the Galena evacuation proved difficult. Some radios were available, cell phones worked for a time, but better communication from the tribe and city to the State, TCC, and FEMA is greatly needed.
- Confusion during evacuations
- Lack of coordination between multiple different responders that didn't contact State or TCC
- Speed of response by state is slow
- State policy for conducting rescues, not evacuations, leads to slow response, slow emergency evacuations, and confusion
- A staging area in Fairbanks is needed for supplies, donations, and to help coordinate items shipped to villages

**Response Solutions:**

- Improve the state policy on authorizing evacuations to allow for evacuations when there is no good shelter in the community, and the airport is in imminent danger of flooding. This will allow for a faster, better coordinated evacuation
- Locate a facility and purchase supplies such as MREs that are needed in the first day or two of a response and keep them on hand. We are aware that the state has emergency drinking water treatment units, but for the first couple days of a flood, it is much easier to use bottled water.

**Recovery Problems:**

TCC doesn't normally interact much with FEMA until the recovery stage of a disaster. Once the recovery begins, many problems become apparent:

- The dual State and FEMA damage assessment is a problem for homeowners and tribal governments. It appears to add delays and seems duplicative and unnecessary to people trying to rebuild their homes in a very short building season
- The process for homeowners, tribal governments, and non-profits to seek aid or reimbursements is confusing and cumbersome.
- The FEMA policy of refusing to supply aid for rebuilding in some flood prone areas, but not in others seems to be inconsistently applied. For example, why was old town Galena not approved for rebuilding, but the old clinic in Circle was refurbished on its current site after having flooded several times in previous years?
- There were procurement issues with FEMA and the temporary winter housing for volunteers and rebuilding staff. Doyon, the 8a Native Corporation for the region was not included. It is likely that they could have provided better housing for less cost.

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- The process of mitigation funding is not clear, and projects that seem to make a lot of sense are not funded. As an example, building up the road in Circle would prevent parts of the community from being isolated and would allow them to drive themselves to safety if an evacuation was needed.
- It is not clear if TCC will be required to purchase flood insurance for some clinic equipment in clinics located in flood zones.
- The application of FEMA policy to the aid TCC is seeking for village clinics seems to keep changing or changes from one village to another, making it difficult for TCC to expedite necessary paperwork.
- FEMA policy makes it nearly impossible to seek reimbursement for staff time worked on disasters. The amount of documentation required is not feasible.
- Over the past several disasters, TCC has developed a good working relationship with the State of AK DHS & EM. TCC needs that kind of relationship with FEMA for effective recovery.
- Temporary clinic facilities that FEMA has used in the past, (Eagle) were inappropriate for the location, and FEMA did not listen to local input.
- Reimbursements are difficult because the invoice and proof of payment are required. Often, the costs are sometimes too great for TCC to front the money, so encumbered POs should be acceptable for use in seeking reimbursement
- FEMA needs to improve communication with local governments, individuals, and regional non-profits.

### **Recovery Solutions:**

- Combine the dual damage assessment process. FEMA could use the state assessment, or at least combine forms or other elements to make it faster.
- Develop checklists or flow charts to make the process of seeking assistance from FEMA easier to understand for individuals, tribal governments, and the regional native non-profits
- Improve communication with tribal governments and TCC.
- Include the regional 8a for profit corporations like Doyon in the process
- Improve FEMA process for ordering building supplies and rebuilding homes/structures in villages
- Designate FEMA liaisons to improve communication
- Ensure that information is getting to affected individuals
- Clearly define criteria and expectations between FEMA and TCC before a disaster in order to facilitate more efficient coordination and recovery.

### **Conclusion**

The comments and descriptions in this paper are not exhaustive and are written to highlight TCC's work in emergency response, problems experienced, and some ideas for solutions to move forward. TCC staff are available to explain in more detail if needed.

## **Appendix A – comments from Galena, Louden Tribal Council**

### Evaluate the roles of first responders:

**Coordinated Planning** - there was no coordinated planning between the State, Federal and Local governments. The City had a plan but communications were down in that no one knew who held what responsibility. In the future the Tribe needs to be involved in the planning for spring breakup. Also trainings need to be held in community so residents will know what to do and where to go. The State and Federal governments should if possible provide training needed to protect the communities.

**Poor Planning.** The evacuation happened so fast that there was not a good record of who left and who stayed. Better planning/training needs to be done in this area so that there is a better accounting for where people are and who is assigned to do what.

**Communication Difficulties** - State first responders arrived when the water receded. They started working and communications were better. Communications did not greatly improve until we could drive cars and get to meetings to find out what was happening. If we remember correctly State responders were in the town before the disaster declaration was declared and communications were with the city only.

**Need Better preparation.** Training needs to be provided to the community to know what to do. More information needs to be provided from the State and Federal governments as to what they actually can and cannot do. As a local region we should have our own training. There are people in our area who have lived on the river all their lives and know the river. Their expertise must be called upon to teach how to survive. Bringing people from the outside is not going to work.

### **In the future:**

1. Communications need improvement in all areas. There needs to be an alternate form of communication other than the phone
2. Boats need to be on standby with life jackets
3. Need to have someone in charge taking names of people getting into boats going to evacuation areas and getting onto planes leaving and where they are going
4. State and Federal Governments need to keep the Tribe involved
5. State should not have to wait for the Federal Government to catch up - time is lost and property is damaged during the delays. In future planning efforts stop using the one size fits all. Living in rural Alaska is not like living in rural lower 48 communities. What works there does not work here. Plans and trainings need to be rural Alaska specific.

Role of tribal governments and Regional Corporations in the development of first responder capabilities in Alaska: First allow tribal governments and regional corporations at seat at the table in the development of our regional plans. We know what is in our area and what is not. TCC's response to the need of our community was exceptional. They were there to make sure people found housing that had nowhere to go. They were there with funding so that tribal members and non-tribal members could meet immediate needs. Coordination was done with the City of Fairbanks to provide a wide range of other services to individuals displaced by the flood. Many residents of Galena would not have been able to check on their homes and see what was needed if TCC had not made travel possible. The actions and services provided by TCC took a great deal of stress off the people going through this trauma. State Disaster funding should be made available to Regional Corporations/Organizations to meet immediate needs.

Louden Tribal Council a federally recognized tribe was not provided the same level of courtesy afforded to the City of Galena. The City was the major player. All the meetings we attended were briefings of what was already done and what was planned. The Tribe was not involved in any of the planning meetings. We should be afforded the same level of communications, as the city cannot make decisions or develop work plans for the tribal holdings.

*Prepared and Submitted by Jenny Pelkola, 1st Chief Louden Tribal Council and March Runner, Tribal Administrator*