



Department of Emergency Services 2023 Year in Review

Stillwater County Emergency Services strives to provide the best possible emergency response, recovery, preparedness, and mitigation services for emergencies and disasters in our county. Over the past two years we have continued to expand and enhance the services we are providing. Planning and real-life experiences make a big difference in how we respond and recover, and we have certainly had our share of real-life experience during 2022 and 2023. We currently are working under two Federally declared disasters for our June 2022 and 2023 flooding events and in June also experienced a train derailment into the Yellowstone River. These are some of the most impactful disasters in Montana's history. We continue to respond to local emergencies, update our local emergency plans, conduct hazard surveys, provide training and exercises, and manage ongoing grant funding.

Emergency Services has been quite busy throughout 2023. We continue to work through the recovery for our June 2022 flooding event and are nearing completion on many of our large Public Assistance projects. We have learned that recovery from a disaster is a long haul and far more difficult than the response phase of any disaster. The initial response to the train derailment was difficult but we will continue with the recovery planning and serve in Unified Command throughout most of 2024. Thankfully our June 2023 flash flooding was not as severe as last year's flood, but we will continue with that recovery throughout much of 2024.

Even though we have experienced some of the most impactful disasters in Montana's history, we continue to work and provide the daily services mentioned in the first paragraph. We continue to enhance our current lifelines, improve services, establish new partnerships, and develop best practices based on our lessons learned.

Throughout 2022 and 2023 we have continued to be fortunate enough to enhance the services we are able to provide. It truly takes a team effort and good partnerships to accomplish this, and we have. We now have a new plan on how we will manage emergencies and disasters after creating an Emergency Operations Center (EOC) handbook and conducting training with our departments. To accompany the handbook, we have created a new space for our EOC that will allow for better coordination and situational awareness. Last year we installed weather stations throughout the county and can now better monitor severe weather. For emergency communications we integrated our land mobile radio system and LTE via a solution from First Net, so we are now able to communicate with a cell phone to our main radio system. This means that we are now able to communicate where there is no radio repeater coverage. Our GIS department has greatly enhanced our mapping abilities and we are now able to conduct more accurate damage surveys and map disasters in real time. This allows county leadership and incident commanders to see disaster and damage locations in near real time. We were fortunate enough to partner with Sibanye Stillwater and purchase two Unmanned Aircraft Systems (UAS), also known as a drone. The UAS has an unlimited number of uses in emergency services and we have already completed multiple damage and hazard assessments.

Our success inside the county has also extended into our Region, across Montana, and the United States. We collaborated with several other counties and have established the Eastern Montana Emergency Service Mutual Aid Agreement (MAA). The agreement allows a county to quickly request assistance from a neighboring county without making a lengthy request for assistance to the state. We successfully used this MAA during our June 2023 train derailment, and we recently assisted with the planning for the funeral of Big Horn County Sheriff Darrell King.



We have formed strong partnerships with Sibanye Stillwater, Senator Daines, Congressman Rosendale, MT DEQ, MT DNRC, Montana Rail Link, BNSF, Department of Homeland Security CISA, MT Sheriffs and Police Officers Association, First Net, and the Environmental Protection Agency. We now can leverage these relationships to improve and streamline our response to future disasters. Locally, we have strong partnerships with Carbon and Yellowstone County DES. We plan, train, and provide coverage on a regular basis, which is a huge benefit across all three counties.

Training, planning, and exercises are an important part of what we do. We were able to coordinate the first ever (in Montana) regional tabletop exercise conducted by the Department of Homeland Security CISA. This exercise brought over 50 federal, state, local, and critical industry partners together for an active shooter hostile event scenario. To continue the momentum from this exercise we secured a Homeland Security grant for active shooter equipment that will be distributed across our region. We will now have the same equipment across our region for an active shooter response. Our department has also taught at the Montana State DES Conference, Montana Floodplain Managers Conference, State Emergency Management Association Conference, and Yellowstone County LEPC Conference. Attending and teaching at conferences allows us to share our lessons learned and best practices with our partners. We recognize the importance of coordinating with local emergency managers across Montana. Our office helped coordinate the 2023 Montana Emergency Management Association conference along with Carbon and Treasure Counties. This conference was the best attended in recent history and Stillwater County Emergency Services was fortunate enough to be elected Vice- President of the association.

While we have experienced many successes, we also have some lessons learned and disappointments over the last year. Communications during large scale disasters are difficult in the county but far more difficult with state and federal agencies. During the June 2022 flooding event we struggled to coordinate and communicate with state and federal agencies. The current State and Federal response models lack the ability to effectively coordinate at the local level. This led to a disjointed approach to the recovery process and in many cases delayed the recovery process altogether. The disjointed approach also increased the workload for our department and distracted us from other projects that we would normally been working to complete. One of the other disappointments was the MT DES debris removal project. MT DES attempted to use a regional approach for debris removal. There was an overall lack of coordination, so the project did not remove much of the hazardous woody debris and it remains in our waterways today. MT DES estimated that between 1,000,000 and 2,000,000 cubic yards of debris was in the region's waterways. At the end of the project MT DES was only able to remove about 150,000 cubic yards of woody debris. To put this perspective, a semi dump bed trailer can haul about 80 cubic yards of woody debris. Our department continues to monitor areas known to have heavy deposits of woody debris. While we are not allowed to remove additional debris, our department will continue to monitor those known hazards.

In summary, Stillwater County Emergency Services has had many successes and formed excellent relationships with many different local, state, federal and industry partners. We will continue to enhance the services we provide, build additional partnerships, and continue supporting and working for the citizens of our county.



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