

Water/Wastewater Agency Response Network (WARN): Tabletop Exercise Facilitator Guide

Background

The water sector (drinking water and wastewater utilities) has been developing intrastate mutual aid and assistance agreements, commonly referred to as Water/Wastewater Agency Response Networks (WARN). The number of statewide agreements has more than tripled in the past year, leading to a better-prepared and more resilient Water Sector. As with any emergency response agreement or plan there is a need to exercise and validate the mutual aid/assistance operational plan utilized during activation of a WARN. EPA is responding to that need by developing tabletop exercise materials and will support the facilitation of exercises.

Tabletop exercises, a form of discussion-based exercises, encourage participants to discuss issues in depth and to develop decisions through slow-paced problem solving, rather than the rapid, spontaneous decision making that occurs under actual or simulated emergency conditions. These conditions will help WARN members coordinate more effectively with state and local emergency management agencies, state primacy and permitting agencies, federal agencies and other audiences.

Purpose

EPA has designed the tabletop exercises materials to bring together key personnel to discuss hypothetical scenarios in an informal setting. This type of exercise typically is aimed at facilitating understanding of concepts, identifying strengths and shortcomings, and affecting changes in the approach to a particular situation. While some WARNs are well-established and have responded to emergencies, others are in the development stages and have not practiced implementation of their agreements. The tabletop exercises materials are designed to guide each WARN in the development and execution of a tabletop exercise to create, update, and/or improve its procedures.

Conducting the Tabletop Exercises

Tabletop exercises will allow WARNs to practice and exercise their mutual aid/assistance operational plan or other procedures so that requesting and responding utilities have a better understanding of how to implement their WARN agreement. By practicing the functionality and operations of activating the agreement, a WARN will respond more effectively and efficiently during an actual incident. Additionally, tabletop exercises facilitate opportunities to:

- Build/strengthen relationships between WARN members
- Define roles and responsibilities of all WARN participants, including the involvement of utilities, state primacy and permitting agencies, state and local emergency management and response agencies, federal agencies (as appropriate) and supporting professional organizations
- Review and simulate procedures to identify “gaps” or areas for improvement
- Optimize mobilization/demobilization and resource-matching procedures
- Validate procedures for activating and modifying WARN agreements
- Refine components of the WARN agreement, mutual aid/assistance operational plan, and administration to manage the WARN

Building on the successful EPA “Emergency Response Tabletop Exercises for Drinking Water and Wastewater Systems CD-ROM,” the tabletop exercise materials will be widely available as an EPA publication and will include instructions for planning, organizing and conducting an exercise specific to the circumstances of an individual WARN. Sample materials include exercise scenarios (flood, hurricane, and earthquake), discussion questions, presentation slides, and a sample evaluation form. The materials also provide instructions for a novice facilitator to lead the discussion, guide participants and keep the focus on exercise objectives. The materials are flexible enough to allow an experienced facilitator to modify them.

For Additional Information

Visit www.NationalWARN.org, or contact John Whitley of EPA (whitley.john@epa.gov).