

GA Airports Need to Be Ready for the Big One

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April 23, 2007 – Emergency management, the National Incident Management System (NIMS), Incident Command Systems (ISC) and a host of programs and directives centered on disaster response and mitigation are encircling the busy lives of airport managers, who may be suffering from the uncomfortable feeling that something dark and ugly may be just around the bend.

Most airport operators make great contingency planners. They are used to things not going as planned, hard landings, landing long, deicing machinery and plows breaking down, power circuits shutting down; the list is endless. But when one ponders the threat posed in today's environment and the vulnerability of public transportation facilities, well...it can keep you up at night with second-guessing if you did the right thing or missed something

obvious.

The prudent airport manager of a small general aviation field should consider this: with the next disaster striking its big brother commercial hub, or indeed the surrounding region, his or her airfield may become the next center of gravity for responding to the incident and potentially serving as the lever to a continuity of operations plan (COOP). COOP is the buzzword these days for corporations and government entities considering how to keep the doors open and the lights on when nature or terrorism shuts them down. This kind of thinking means strong regional cooperation, coordination and planning. No single major airport can expect to deal with a catastrophic, facility-closing event without taking a hard look at the major assets available in the region. Should it be a natural disaster, every airfield with jet-capable runways can become a potential jumping-off point for a mass evacuation using national assets such as the National Disaster Medical Systems (NDMS). The fact of the matter is that the major regional airport or hub will focus primarily on returning to service as quickly as possible, with the understanding that the assets and businesses in place are difficult or impossible to relocate or transplant. Tenant facilities do not relocate easily, though with proper planning and the luck of geography (i.e. having a joint use airfield nearby with runways appropriate to a commercial fleet mix), a larger commercial airport can indeed plan for such an event.

Sacramento County Airport System is in the midst of selecting a consultant to provide planning and support service to do just that. With Mather airport nearby (once a busy military airfield), Sacramento International has the option of exercising a contingency plan to relocate commercial operations to that airfield in the event of a catastrophic flood event – a major risk since the airport is adjacent to a river system.

While your GA airport may not necessarily be in a position to support commercial jet operations because of pavement limitations, you should consider your facility from a regional support perspective;

such as enabling vertical lift into the region in support of medical and displaced victim relocations. There is no simple approach to planning for such an event, but Homeland Security Presidential Directive (HSPD-8) calls on government entities to plan for “all-hazards.” As proprietors of potentially critical assets to regional recovery after a disaster, we are charged with meeting the letter and intent of that directive.

Planning for this kind of contingency requires a methodical approach. The steps of doing so may look like this:

- Conduct a threat & vulnerability assessment – regionally and locally.
- Account for your assets and their potential role in a regional disaster.
- Prioritize needs and critical issues which need to be addressed.
- Regularly train and exercise for the event (ICS).
- Review periodically.

These undertakings require time and thoughtful coordination with mutual aid agencies in your jurisdiction, the regional and federal emergency response agencies and most importantly, the governance and executive branch of your airport. The planning, design and implementation of a response to a weapon of mass destruction (WMD) or other disaster in your jurisdiction cannot be addressed with emergency responders alone, nor can the federal government be depended upon to roll-in to save the day, at least not until all your efforts have been outstripped by the incident response.

This all-hazards approach to contingency planning is an all-hands effort, from the accountant to the mechanic. It is a community response mission and it will take the entire “village” to bring back and operate an airport under these circumstances.

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