

TRIBAL EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT BUSINESS?

(Why Worry, We Have Insurance!)

BY GLENN ZARING

What business do tribal nations and companies have getting involved in emergency management planning? The answer will not make you happy...but the truth is like that sometimes.

Do you have a spare tire in your car or truck? Is there a set of jumper cables in the trunk? Do you carry around medicines for your children in case they need it? How many of you carry a rescue inhaler in the event that your asthma kicks up? Congratulations: You are actively involved in emergency management and planning. All of those items are preparation for your personal “just in case they are needed” scenarios. That concept, by the way, is the soul of emergency management!

Now, think about applying that principle to your nation, tribe and business. What have you done to prepare for an incident or disaster that could affect you?

For years (especially since Hurricane Katrina), there has been a push for tribes to “become compliant” with federal emergency management programs, training and guidelines. Heaven knows that tribal lands are subject to natural disasters: In recent years, several tribes in the Pacific Northwest have been hit with fires, while some tribes in Oklahoma have been devastated by tornadoes and floods.

The push for compliance typically has come with high-handed pressure tied to free money. “If your tribal nation is not compliant with the National Incident Management System (NIMS), it will affect your ability to receive federal grants.” This threat prompted a few tribal members to study the requirements and to implement the bare minimum to achieve “compliance.” After a few years, however, all the lessons learned and programs implemented were no longer of interest to many tribal governments, and they were abandoned in principle, if not in name. Of course, on grant applications, they still checked the box that said that they were in “compliance” with NIMS.

With a nod to a small cadre of interested, informed, wonderful individuals at FEMA/DHS and their outstanding education facility, the Emergency Management Institute (EMI), much effort has been made to train and equip tribal emergency management personnel. It was exciting and empowering to many of us, but it was also a major disappointment once we got back to the Rez!

A few years ago, the now-retired and respected tribal liaison for both FEMA and DHS, Steve Golubic, told a number of us working on a tribal focus group that there was a narrow window of opportunity for tribes to make the most of emergency management. That window has now closed; and with only a few exceptions, tribal nations have missed the boat – the “free” money boat that is! Now we are fighting for a reduced pot of grant dollars and are seeing much more in matching grant requirements. These

requirements knock many tribes out of the competition because they cannot or will not come up with the dollars needed.

Having been an active combatant in the fight to receive federal dollars on behalf a tribe, it is evident from my now-retired perspective that the problem is one that also affects nontribal businesses, municipalities and entities. The problem goes by a number of pseudonyms, including the infamous NIMBY (not in my backyard) view of catastrophes, disasters and incidents! Too many political leaders, business leaders and assorted policy types view these possibilities in their jurisdiction as public affairs opportunities to get some face time “decrying the tragedy” and appealing for prayers and money.

With all due love and respect for those tribal cultures who do not talk about these disasters for fear of inviting them upon their nations, we owe it to our people and our lands to think differently about some of the things that could happen. Many of our leaders have fallen prey to the nontribal world view that says sufficient insurance and enough lawyers on retainer will take care of any disaster. This view is dangerous, especially when many of the effects of calamities can be reduced and managed effectively beforehand. They can be mitigated! You can reduce your exposure and minimize damage. Unfortunately, we see that most leaders do not want to take the difficult route and devote the assets and resources needed to accurately assess threats and plan accordingly.

In business, we often speak about “continuity planning,” which is merely another way of describing emergency planning. How do we handle unexpected changes in our corporate leadership? How can we handle unexpected changes in market conditions that directly affect our business operation? What happens if our supply chain breaks down and we cannot get some critical component of our product, which then delays our just-in-time delivery to maybe next week?

Here’s the part that you are not going to like: Tribal businesses and tribal nations should honestly consider conducting a thoughtful threat assessment of their operations. Throw out your preconceived notions or ill-informed opinions and actually look at the possibilities and what you can do to handle them when and if they occur. Or, better yet, devote the resources, assets and people needed to get ahead of problems and mitigate them. Doing so will vastly improve your chances of staying in business and staying viable. After all, what is our purpose as a tribal business or tribal government? It is ensuring the continued existence of our people, protecting our lands and preserving our culture. ♦

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