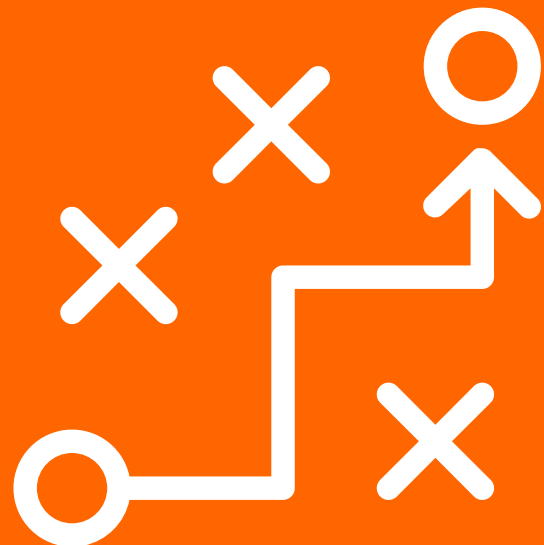


Guide to Developing a Severe Weather Emergency Plan for Your Business



Severe weather is one of the great unknowns. It can happen anywhere, at any time, with little to no warning, causing untold devastation to your company.

Worse still, businesses, especially small and medium-sized enterprises, aren't doing a great job of preparing for emergency weather incidents. According to the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), 40 percent of small businesses don't reopen after a natural disaster. Among those that do, only 29 percent remain operational two years later¹.



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Among those that do, only **29%** remain operational **2** years later.

So what does it all mean? Well, as part of their legal and regulatory requirement to keep staff and customers safe, businesses need to adequately prepare for severe weather situations. Potential scenarios include any of the following (and more):



Winter storms and extreme cold



Wildfires



Thunderstorms and lightning



Extreme heat



Flooding



Hurricanes



Tornadoes

Preparedness means developing and implementing severe weather plans based on those likely emergencies. However, this kind of planning can be challenging. Fortunately, though, there are resources to help. We've consulted the best of them and put together a step-by-step guide to developing a severe weather emergency plan for your business.

1 Understand the purpose and scope

Before putting pen to paper on your severe weather emergency plan, it's critical to consider two factors: the plan's purpose and its scope. In other words, lay out what you are trying to accomplish with the plan, and what material will be covered in it.

Try to be as clear and concise as possible in distilling your points. Goals and objectives will, of course, vary depending on the design of your organization's location (the site), available resources, as well as a set of regionally-specific weather risks.

US natural disaster and severe weather seasons

Natural disaster	Typical season	Typical geographic location
Severe winter weather	Nov. 1-Mar. 1	Northeast, Midwest, Mountain West, Northwest, selected parts of the Southeast and Mid-Atlantic
Flooding	Mar. 1-June 30	Northwest, Mountain West, Northwest, Midwest
Flash flooding	Year-round	Nationwide
Tornadoes	Mar. 1-June 30	Midwest, Southeast, Southwest, Mid-Atlantic
Hurricanes	June 1-Nov. 30	Gulf Coast and along the Atlantic seaboard
Thunderstorms and lightning	Mar. 1-Sept. 30	Central Plains, Southeast, Mid-Atlantic, Southwest
Hailstorms	Mar. 1-Sept. 30	East of the Rockies
Wildfires	Mar.1-June 1	Southeast
	June 1-Nov. 1	Mountain West, Pacific West, Southwest

When tailoring the plan to your site's specific design, make sure to consult an engineer or architect. That person will help to identify safety zones within the structure, normally small interior rooms, bathrooms, windowless interior hallways, etc.ⁱⁱ.

In addition, outline roles, responsibilities, and duties for site supervisors and other staff members involved in managing the emergency. The resulting plan will likely cover the following:

- 

Protocols to follow during severe weather incidents
- 

High-level considerations to follow
- 

A definition of teams assigned to the incident
- 

Clear action plans to execute
- 

Roles, responsibilities, and expectations for all team members
- 

An evacuation strategy

2 Master severe weather emergency terminology


Memorizing the precise definitions of a bunch of meteorological terms like winter storm, hurricane, and tornado might seem unproductive. But terminology matters when you're getting relevant information from a recommended source, like the US National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA).


For instance, a severe weather incident is a meteorological phenomenon that could endanger people or cause damage to your site. Such an incident (plan) will most likely be activated when the relevant weather agency (usually NOAA if you're in the US) issues a weather Warning, Watch, or Advisory. Those terms refer to the following:


- A **Warning** is issued when a hazardous weather or hydrologic event is occurring, imminent, or likely. A Warning means weather conditions pose a threat to life or property. Staff and customers will need to take protective action.
- A **Watch** is used when the risk of a hazardous weather or hydrologic event has increased significantly, but its occurrence, location, or timing is still uncertain. It is intended to provide enough lead time so those who need to set their plans in motion can do so. A Watch means that hazardous weather is possible.
- An **Advisory** is issued when a hazardous weather or hydrologic event is occurring, imminent, or likely. Advisories are given to less serious conditions than Warnings. However, Advisories still cause significant inconvenience and if caution is not exercised, could lead to situations which threaten life or propertyⁱⁱⁱ.


3 Compile emergency contact lists


When planning for a severe weather incident, ensure that your incident response folks have ready access to contact information for key stakeholders. Those include:

- 

Emergency services
- 

Local fire department
- 

Local emergency information line
- 

Local hospital
- 

Local police department

If your business uses crisis or incident management technology, which it should, make sure that an up-to-date contact list is easily accessible within that system.

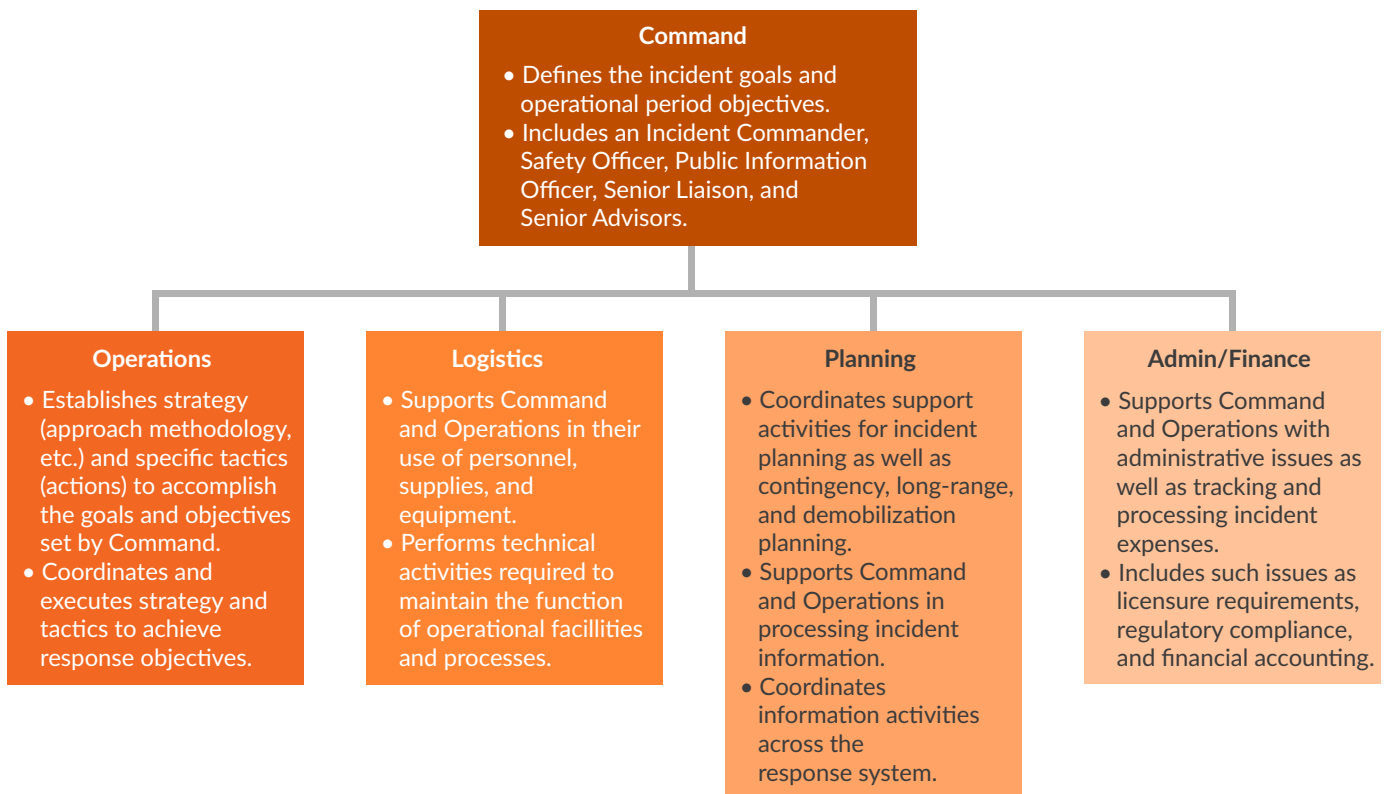
4 Pick a command structure to make response more efficient

When researchers studied the responses to a whole slew of California fires in the 1970s, they found something surprising. Generally speaking, incident responses didn't fail because of a lack of resources or a failure of tactics. Lacking instead was adequate management^{iv}. That moment proved the genesis of the Incident Command System (ICS).

Designed to enable the effective and efficient management of incidents, including severe weather emergencies, the ICS integrates a combination of facilities, equipment, personnel, procedures, and communications operating within a common organizational structure. The system is traditionally structured around five major functional areas: command, operations, logistics, planning, and administration/finance.

So as to ensure effective command, control, and coordination during an incident, your organization should activate the Incident Command System (as depicted below)^v.

Incident Command System Structure



Source: U.S. Department of Health & Human Services Office of the Assistant Secretary for Preparedness and Response

Another big governance and escalation-related matter to consider for your plan is how you will coordinate with first responder agencies.

5 Prepare your communication strategy ahead of time

When incident response goes awry, flawed communication is often to blame. It's easy to understand why. Without a proactive, emergency weather-focused media strategy, rumor, innuendo, and misinformation spread.

As such, your communication plan should address central points, like what communications you'll deploy in the event of an incident (landline telephone, mobile phones, two-way radio, etc.). Here are a comprehensive list of communications methods:

Communications method	What to do with it
Standard telephone	The organization has a designated telephone number that acts as a recorded "hotline" for family members to call for information during the incident. The purpose of this is to keep all other organization telephone lines open for communication with first responders and other agencies.
Cellular telephone	Staff may use their mobile devices for internal and external communication during the incident.
Public address (PA) system	The organization PA system provides communication from various points around the site with all areas of the site.
Two-way radio	Two-way radios are available for security staff communication between rooms and buildings.
Computers	You may use a wireless laptop computer for communication in the site or with other sites. You may use email as a tool for updating information internally or externally. You may post critical external communication on your website.
Alarm systems	The site has alarm systems with bells or buzzers to signal the type of incident. All staff are trained on what specific sounds mean and how to respond to them.

Furthermore, creating on-the-fly messages in the midst of a catastrophic weather event is not ideal. At the ready, you should have a set of pre-fab communication between management and staff as well as with the head office. Responsible as this person will be for the overall management of the incident, your Incident Commander will also spearhead the communication effort.

6 Select your team. Set their roles and responsibilities.

Team-driven operational planning is central to most successful incident responses. In other words, choose wisely when selecting your core Site Response and Incident Command System (ICS) teams.

The site response effort usually includes a supervisor (or manager) and staff. Supervisors are responsible for the people on the site and must remain with those people until otherwise directed. Other responsibilities including the following:



Supervising people



Taking steps to ensure the safety of people, in accordance with incident management protocols



Directing people to designated assembly points when instructed by signals, warnings, written notifications, or intercom orders

Meanwhile, the Incident Command System team includes the following roles: Incident Commander, Policy Group, Operations Controller, Planning Controller, and Logistics Controller.





7 Prepare your response and action plans

The final step is preparing your response and action plans. Your response plan designates concrete emergency notification procedures you'll take once you've confirmed what kind of emergency weather situation you're facing.




For many reasons, this step tends to be the thorniest. Activating your plan with full confidence often requires having as much information as possible about the weather situation, i.e. expected severity and time of impact. That kind of high-quality information isn't always forthcoming. Plan around this fact, by phasing your response into multiple stages.



The subsequent action plan unfolds largely based on the results of an initial risk assessment that your team will perform after a severe weather Advisory, Watch, or Warning is issued. Essentially, the assessment answers the following questions:

-  Is the expected or current weather condition likely to result in serious harm to people or cause damage to the site?
-  Is the expected or current weather condition likely to halt the normal operations of the site?
-  Is the incident occurring during business or non-business hours?
-  Is the incident occurring during morning opening or afternoon closing?

Post-risk assessment, the site manager will assess the possible impact and determine whether to do one of the following:

-  Shelter in place
-  Evacuate the site
-  Temporarily close the site and suspend all activities



Severe weather is a fact of life. By extension, it's a fact of business life that you need to plan for, by developing a robust severe weather plan to keep your staff and customers safe and protect your property investment.

Preparedness, however, doesn't end with severe weather disaster planning. You should also give a thought to what your business will do to recover from the incident.

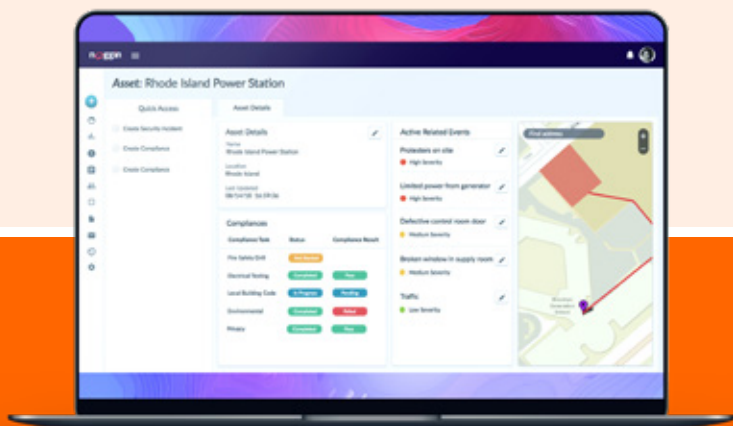
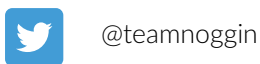
After developing your plan, keep testing and refining it alongside local first responder agencies. What's more, don't forget to stock up important equipment (like water, non-perishable food, flashlights, and batteries). Just remember, your diligent efforts are what it takes to mitigate the impact of a hazardous weather event.

Citations

- i Ryan Scott, *Forbes: Will Your Business Recover From Disaster?* Available at <https://www.forbes.com/sites/causeintegration/2014/09/04/will-your-business-recover-from-disaster/#6b9ead4f295c>.
- ii Brian Montgomery, *National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration: When the Weather Turns Severe: A guide to developing a severe weather emergency plan for schools.* Available at <https://www.weather.gov/media/aly/School%20Weather%20Safety%20Plan.pdf>.
- iii *National Weather Service Forecast Office.* Available at <https://www.wrh.noaa.gov/boi/awareness/warningwatchadvisory.php>.
- iv *Federal Emergency Management Agency: Incident Command Training.* Available at <https://training.fema.gov/emiweb/is/icsresource/assets/reviewmaterials.pdf>.
- v *Federal Emergency Management Agency: Incident Command System Resources.* Available at <https://www.fema.gov/incident-command-system-resources>.



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