

CERT Volunteers Respond to Coastal Flooding Threat in Pacific Northwest

Point Roberts, a city in Whatcom County, Washington is geographically unique: It is the only part of the 48 contiguous states that can only be accessed by air, sea, or through a foreign country. By land, Point Roberts is only accessible through an international border crossing in Canada. From the United States, Point Roberts is only accessible by air or sea. These limited and restrictive points of entry would make it challenging for outside responders, even from neighboring communities, to reach Point Roberts and provide assistance in the event of an emergency. According to Bob Jacobson, Whatcom County Community Emergency Response Team (CERT) Coordinator, “It takes about an hour to reach the community’s 1,500 residents by car. If there was an emergency, it may be impossible to get to Point Roberts unless you have boats.” This makes emergency preparedness and self-sufficiency critical for the small coastal community.

Point Roberts is unique in other ways as well. For example, a large number of Canadians spend their summers in Point Roberts, increasing the community’s population by thousands during this time of year. In addition, the community does not have a formal government structure. The chief of the local volunteer fire department generally serves in a role similar to that of a mayor.

Without a formal government in place in Point Roberts, and given its unique geographic disposition, residents are likely to be on their own in the early stages of a disaster. This became clear during a three-day power outage in the winter of 2006. Residents expected power to be restored quickly, but the community’s remote location resulted in delays. Several residents found themselves without fresh food while the outage persisted.

To become more self-sufficient during future emergencies and prepare residents to care for themselves and others, the community formed the Point Roberts Emergency Preparedness (PREP) group. In addition to participating in CERT training, PREP members train to conduct neighborhood safety assessments and set up power generators, and even maintain a community phonebook so that residents can more easily contact one another.



Whatcom County CERT volunteers prepare sandbags in anticipation of flooding in December 2014.

On December 12, 2014, the PREP group put their skills to the test. Every December, Point Roberts faces a high tide, but on this particular day they expected the tide to crest over 10 feet above normal levels and winds to exceed 40 mph. The Point Roberts fire chief requested that PREP and Whatcom County CERT volunteers support efforts to prepare for anticipated flooding. Port Roberts sits only 4-5 feet above sea level, so flooding is a major concern for the community and its residents. “The biggest threats I

worry about are floods and tsunamis. Because the most populated area in Point Roberts is right on the water, it is going to impact houses and people,” said Jacobson.

This was the first time volunteers were activated to respond to an emergency situation, but the fire chief was confident in the group’s abilities because they were well organized, well trained, and enthusiastic about helping their community. They also benefitted from a strong communications network. PREP leader Virginia Lester contacted volunteers via email and phone, and even though it was a weekday, within 45 minutes PREP volunteers arrived and worked with the local fire department to place 200 sandbags along the coastline. Lester said she was proud of the volunteers, and praised their commitment to helping others and their readiness to respond when their community needed them.

PREP organizes monthly meetings, which serve as opportunities to offer additional training opportunities to volunteers, including HAM radio communications, identifying shelter locations, and assessing the safety of shelters. PREP is also planning a “CERT Muster.” During the muster, volunteers will bring in their emergency kits, have them checked to ensure that they have all necessary equipment, and sign up for additional trainings, including volunteer intake, administrative support, point of distribution (POD) operations, and search and rescue. The program selected these specific trainings to increase the capacity of volunteers to support the whole community and, in particular, firefighters.

Jacobson stresses the importance of establishing a strong working relationship between volunteers and local government officials. “It is important because responders need to know what volunteers can and cannot do...knowing what to expect and needs to be done is crucial to a quick, accurate response in the aftermath of any disaster,” he says. Jacobson emphasizes that this is especially critical in smaller, more isolated areas like Point Roberts that may rely upon volunteers to take the lead during emergencies more than in other communities: “In our community, CERT volunteers are leaders in response and champions of preparedness.”