

Civil Defence and Emergency Management

Whanganui – Flood evacuation procedures

Through the conversations we (Massey University) have had with residents over the past few months we found that many people were not aware of evacuation procedures in case of floods. So, we reached out to the local Civil Defence and Emergency Management office and they have provided the following synopsis of what might be involved in evacuation procedures for your area.

Flood Evacuations:

If heavy rain or flooding is predicted the situation and monitoring sites are watched closely by experienced local and regional emergency management and hydrology staff who assess the risk to the community and the likelihood of an evacuation being required.

Warnings are aimed at giving those in the floods path time to evacuate safely with pets, stock and valuables. If time and resources allow, this may include working with volunteers and the community to move as much as we can out of the way and to safe locations.

An evacuation warning message is authorised for release by the local or Regional Civil Defence Controller, under the need to alert the community to either an imminent or potential hazard in a specific area. It is sent out by as many channels or means as it can in order to ensure maximum coverage along with clear and accurate advice.

If a flood is considered possible and time and resources are available, Civil Defence and community volunteers working in pairs under Police guidance will door knock at risk areas. This gives time to gather essentials, collect pets, organise travel or accommodation, and to raise or move household items and valuables. Ideally it is done in daylight, but may occur at any time.

Door knocking and verbal warnings to individual house holds takes time, personnel and resources so it is not the only method used. Warning teams may be preceded and/or accompanied by sirens and “stinger” loudspeaker vehicles, fire or other emergency vehicles, and teams will always have identification visible and be in recognisable uniforms or high visibility clothing. They will provide basic information, timings and fliers about where to go if help is needed. A Civil Defence Centre will be opened for people to go to in order to seek help or information. This Registration and Needs Assessment process at these Centres is designed to provide efficient and tailored assistance to evacuees. By

law, this information cannot be shared for anything other than the emergency response.

Warnings may also be given over local radio networks including Brian FM, Awa FM and others as well as via media release and the internet.

Evacuation may become mandatory if the risk to life and property is considered likely and an emergency is declared. In this case it is a legal order, enforceable by the police. Evacuated areas are then restricted zones and patrolled to prevent crime. Evacuation areas or road blocks may expand to meet security and cordon needs, to help aid evacuations, reduce congestion and reduce risk.

If the situation changes rapidly and/or requires a quicker response, an immediate evacuation may be required without an initial warning and preparation period.

People in flood or tsunami prone areas should be prepared for evacuations with a “go bag” at hand containing essential items they can add essentials to in a hurry.

Giving people more time requires earlier decision making, often when models and outcomes are less certain. This may lead to times when evacuations occur followed by the flood not eventuating. Decision makers have to weigh up the benefits of early warnings against this risk while being aware of the delays make evacuations more difficult. Repeated near miss events where a flood doesn't occur may lead to complacency and the “Chicken Little” effect where warnings are then ignored. A useful approach is to consider these events as practice for when the next big flood does occur.

Based on the answer provided by CDEM, we think there are a few things that you can do to work on your flood preparedness:

ONE

Register on the Horizons Flood Alert page at

www.horizons.govt.nz/river-alert-system

TWO

Ensure you have a 'go bag' ready with essential medication, masks, special dietary items, copies of important documentation, animal food etc. Visit the Civil Defence website for more information www.civildefence.govt.nz

THREE

Practise with your animals so they are comfortable with getting in and out of an animal carry cage if you need to move them in a hurry.