

Clackamas County rescue team will be first in state

The sheriff's office and fire district are teaming up to create a water-based emergency response team

BY MATTHEW GRAHAM

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After working together for years on waterborne rescues, the Clackamas County Sheriff's Office and the Clackamas Fire District No. 1 are forming a federally recognized emergency response team for floods and other disasters.

The Swiftwater Rescue Team, the first in the state, is a federally supported group trained to deal with the most severe flooding and other waterborne disasters.

Lt. Graham Phalen of the sheriff's office said the two agencies have been working together for years and already have much of the expertise necessary. But when he deployed in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, he saw similar rescue teams in action.

"We've been doing things right for a long time ... but when I deployed back east (for Hurricane Katrina) and saw how things were being run in a disaster area, I brought back a lot of (insight)," he said. "We have probably what is the most qualified team that is able to respond in this manner not only because of the way we train, but the partnerships we've made.

"It will save lives and make a difference," he said of the team. "It's also going to be able to give us some technical skills that will make us better prepared for dealing with floods in our own area."

Essentially what the county approved last week was to put up to \$400,000 in case the team has to deploy. Through an interstate agreement, most of the costs associated with the team would be repaid.

"We'd be giving a bridge loan essentially so you can do great stuff for people in need," said County Commissioner Ann Lininger. "So you're just asking for us to put some money up front so you can help people — in the process you're going to get on-the-job emergency training."

Phalen and Sgt. Steve Thoroughman, of the sheriff's marine patrol, said becoming an official team at the top tier of rescue operations means they could deploy for national events, like Katrina.

"Every state is trying to develop teams," Phalen said. "The people I talked to in (Los Angeles) said if you form a team you're going to deploy federally."

But Sheriff Craig Roberts reassured the commission that the county has discretion as to whether it could afford to deploy, financially and in terms of personnel.

And Thoroughman said the up-front costs weren't huge.

"The work that we do doesn't require significantly more training, a huge amount of more equipment," he said. "We already work together, we already train together, this will only ... cement us together in a way that we can help the people of Clackamas County."



L.E. BASKOW / OREGON CITY NEWS
The Clackamas County Sheriff's Office during a search and rescue operation earlier this year.

The team would be a type 1 team, the highest level in the federal designation. Thoroughman said there are currently 21 type 1 teams in the nation.

Clackamas Fire Chief Ed Kirchhofer said developing the team now will make sure the county is prepared when disasters like Katrina strike again.

“What was the biggest thing government was criticized for (after Katrina) — not being ready,” he said. This “is really an effort to jump through al those hoops, have those answers” before hand.