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National Preparedness Month: September 2007

A RATTLESNAKE'S TAIL:

Emergency Preparedness in the American Southwest

By John Cavanagh and Anne Malia

The American Southwest is home to some of the most astonishing areas in the country, including burning deserts and otherworldly canyons. Although breathtaking, the terrain can be stark and unforgiving. The Native Americans who live in the region have survived there for over a thousand years, and have a unique understanding of the land and its wonders—and dangers. There is a Navaho proverb that states, “There is nothing as eloquent as a rattlesnake’s tail.” This illustrates perfectly the proper attitude to take towards emergency preparedness. Having knowledge and respect for warning signs can often help avert potential disaster.

The Navajo Nation consists of twelve counties, which span across three states: Arizona, New Mexico, and Utah. For such a large area, contending with emergency response issues—often without proper technology for communication—can raise a number of challenges. Addressing emergency preparedness is very important for the Navajo Nation, which has suffered a number of disasters, including wildfires, floods, and outbreaks of disease among both humans and animals.

The Global Disaster Information Network (GDIN) is a non-profit coalition of international professionals and organizations dedicated to providing disaster information. GDIN recently announced a plan to create a specialized disaster information network designed and managed by Native Americans. The network would be made up of offices established on Native American land for the purpose of helping to alert the various tribes of impending disasters. GDIN’s plan also

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includes providing recovery information and education regarding emergency information challenges faced by certain communities. So far, participants in the Native American network have included the Bureau of Indian Affairs, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), the U.S. Department of the Interior and the National Congress of American Indians.

Herman Shorty, director of the Navajo Nation Office of Environmental Health, is excited about the plan. “As we become more knowledgeable of the hazards out there and identify them, we’re recognizing the need of partnership with neighboring responders. Whether it’s natural or biological, [emergencies] know no boundaries or color—we need to stand unified,” said Shorty, who also chairs the Navajo Nation Emergency Management Committee. The committee is made up of 13 people, including the police chief, fire chief, various health workers, and other emergency officials. It also works with members of the Pueblo Nation, a tribe that is seeking to establish one of the network’s “nodes” within its territory.

Whether signals of possible danger are delivered on a small scale or a large scale—through a rattlesnake’s tail or a technical communications network—it is essential they be received and understood so that an effective response can be put into effect.

Resource 18 – Regional Preparedness:

Emergency Management Training for Tribal Representatives

<http://www.fema.gov/government/tribal/training.shtm>

FEMA offers a course that provides tribal leaders and representatives with a basic understanding of emergency management principles and defines their role in leading and directing their tribes in developing and implementing comprehensive emergency management systems. Specific topics include definition and analysis of hazards, developing an emergency operations plan, assuring readiness through training and exercises, forming partnerships in the

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public and private sectors, and upgrading and sustaining emergency management capabilities.

TOMORROW: Force of Nature: Emergency Preparedness in the Interior Plains

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Article inquiries welcome. On request, we can provide feature-length articles tailored to your audience and requirements. **Please contact John Cavanagh at Bridge Multimedia: (212) 213-3740 or jcavanagh@bridgemultimedia.com.**