

Natural Disasters and COVID-19

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Employers in business, health care, and municipalities are tasked with making vital decisions when it comes to evaluating and implementing emergency disaster preparedness policies and programs for their organizations. Unfortunately, the emergence of COVID-19 has ushered in an era in which the addition of an infectious disease/pandemic component to such emergency preparedness programs is an absolute necessity.

As we approach summer in the United States, a season typically associated with numerous natural disaster events including tornadoes in the Midwest and South, hurricanes in the South and East, flooding in the plains, and fires in the West, it is becoming increasingly clear that the likelihood of these events colliding with COVID-19 responses and/or national protests is high. Such clarity must undoubtedly foster a sense of urgency to reassess what it means to be prepared. What does an emergency response look like during a pandemic? How can businesses conduct emergency preparedness drills or evacuate employees from a building while still complying with social distancing guidelines? How does a business determine a designated meeting location to safely wait out a natural disaster when community shelters are no longer a healthy place? What is the strategy if disease response and exposure results in a lower availability of first responders? In summary, what will COVID-19 mean for the natural disaster seasons in the United States?



In recent years, California has experienced destructive fires more frequently. Last year, there were over 7,000 fires in California producing significant structural damage and casualties. The 2019 Kincadee fire in Sonoma County burned over 77,000 acres, and resulted in mandatory evacuations of 90,000 people, with orders and warnings later growing to the evacuation of about 190,000 people. (<https://www.fire.ca.gov/incidents/2019/10/23/kincadee-fire/>) NOAA has predicted the Atlantic hurricane season in 2020 will be “unusually active” with two storms, Arthur and Bertha having developed by May. (<https://www.washingtonpost.com/weather/2020/06/01/tropical-disturbance-likely-develop-gulf-mexico-kick-off-official-start-hurricane-season/>) In recent years hurricanes such as Harvey (2017) and Irma (2017) resulted in the evacuation of millions people from their homes in the Gulf Coast states.



Mass emergency responses to these and other seasonal natural hazards could impact the spread of COVID-19. Recommended COVID-19 countermeasures such as social distancing clash with the traditional emergency natural disaster response, however disregarding social distancing during a natural disaster could increase the potential for infection and create a “super-spreader” event. Some areas have unfortunately already had this dual experience. Recently a dam failure in Michigan, an earthquake in Croatia, tropical cyclone in the Pacific, a volcano eruption

in Indonesia, flash flooding in Spain, and tornadoes in Iowa have disrupted COVID-19 control measures and the effects of experiencing a two-front battle of this type have not yet been analyzed, counted or understood.

Natural disasters in the age of COVID-19 will require employer, community, regional and state planning and policy changes. Local, federal and state government agencies that typically handle natural disaster response are currently grappling with COVID-19 and have been severely tested. Many states have mutual aid compacts, but limited supply stores and manpower may prevent states from sending aid to other states, as obtaining items such as sufficient PPE for responders as well as volunteers has consistently proven difficult in recent months. Further, while there is some opportunity to utilize vacant hotel rooms and college dorms as a means of temporary social-distance friendly shelter, if emergency group sheltering becomes necessary, previous standards such as buffet-style food and bed spacing must be re-evaluated. Increased hygiene and cleaning and temperature checks may also be required for both disaster victims and volunteers.

Municipalities, businesses, food processing, manufacturing and commercial real estate in regions prone to natural disasters are examples of organizations that should consider including pandemic components into their disaster policies and preparations. Their response teams should identify risks in their area and encourage employees to reassess personal/family disaster plans, stay alert and report potential hazards. The National Center for Disaster Preparedness has a US Natural Hazards Index where one can aggregate hazards from disasters on a map as a planning tool to visualize historical and projected data for numerous natural hazards (<https://ncdp.columbia.edu/library/mapsmapping-projects/us-natural-hazards-index/>). In addition, the Federal government has resources for preparing and reacting to natural disasters, including how to create an emergency plan and preparation checklists (<https://www.usa.gov/prepare-for-disasters>).



The CDC has advised people living in regions at risk for a natural disaster to allow for more time than usual to restock and prepare emergency food, water and medical supplies and has issued tips to lower the risk of spreading diseases such as COVID-19 while staying in a public disaster shelter. These tips include practicing social distancing, abiding by COVID-19 preventative actions (hand washing, covering of coughs and sneezing, and avoiding sharing food and drink), avoiding high-touch surfaces, cleaning and disinfecting frequently-touched items, and informing shelter staff immediately if you feel ill or if you notice someone

who may be ill (<https://www.cdc.gov/disasters/hurricanes/covid-19/public-disaster-shelter-during-covid.html>).

RHP's safety & health professionals have aided employers, businesses, and public entities during and after natural disasters to: assess health and safety of indoor and community air quality (IAQ) due to smoke or water intrusion; create personal protective equipment (PPE) plans and / or address needs for responders during recovery response; conduct site and re-occupancy evaluations and debris characterization; sample soil, air and buildings; rank public health concerns; assist with product loss determination; safety & health plans, infectious disease plans, and provide transparency in communication.

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For more resources concerning COVID-19, visit <https://rhprisk.com/coronavirus/>